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School choice is the opportunity for parents to decide the educational setting they deem most appropriate for their children. The federal government and state courts influenced the parameters of school choice with rulings that created opportunities for parental choice possibilities to grow. Provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act* give students opportunities to escape failing schools. However, many concerns and cautions exist to warn parents as consumers about the potential outcomes of school choice, not only for their children's educational achievement but also for the outcomes of disadvantaged Black students who may not have the means or equal opportunity to choose higher performing schools.

The expansion of charter schools has become major competition for traditional public schools. President Barack Obama's Race to the Top (RttT) grants forced states to have a plan to allow charter schools to expand their place in the educational market. As with traditional public schools, however, not all charter schools are created equal. Whether charter schools are providing high quality competition for traditional public schools, and a different educational opportunity for students to be academically successful, remains to be seen.

This study examined the history of school choice in the United States and North Carolina. The impact of charter schools on a collective case study of disadvantaged Black middle school student's educational experiences was investigated. The perceptions

of the students, their parents, and the teachers were investigated to determine the positive or negative factors that influenced the student participants' educational experiences and how the mitigating instructional, organizational, social, and cultural attributes of schools influence the investment in their education.

CHARTER SCHOOLS, A CHOICE OR NECESSITY FOR DISADVANTAGED
BLACK STUDENTS: EXAMINING PERCEPTIONS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL
STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

by

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I dedicate this dissertation to all of the Black boys and girls who wanted and were capable, but could not go to school, to those who died in pursuit of equal rights for all, and to those who do not yet realize this pursuit was for you. I also dedicate this work to my parents, my grandparents, my husband, my son, and to all who influenced me and shared this journey with me. Truly, “the journey is the reward” (Author unknown).

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Tracey L. Helton Lewis, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	xi
LIST OF FIGURES	xii
 CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Background of the Study	2
Background of the Research Study Setting	4
Organization of the Study	7
Statement of the Problem.....	8
Disadvantaged Students	10
Black Students	13
Purpose of the Study	17
Significance of the Study	18
Significance of the Case Study	19
Definition of Terms.....	21
Academic Achievement	21
Middle School Students	22
School Success.....	23
School Challenges or Difficulties	24
End of Grade Tests (EOGs)	25
Charter Schools	26
Disadvantaged Students	27
High Poverty Schools	30
Traditional Public Schools.....	31
My Positionality as Researcher.....	32
Research Questions	35
Limitations	35
Delimitations.....	37
Assumptions.....	38
II. LITERATURE REVIEW	39
Introduction.....	39
The Historical Background of Charter Schools	39
The History of Charter Schools in North Carolina	43
Charter Schools versus Traditional Public Schools	49

Conceptual Framework	52
Critical Race Theory	54
Components of the Conceptual Framework	57
Instructional Attributes of Schools	58
Schools as Organizations	61
Social Influence of Schools	65
Influence of School Culture	69
 III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	 73
Success Academy	74
North Carolina School Report Card	74
Research Design	77
Qualitative Case Study Approach	78
Data Collection	80
Observations	83
Participant Recruitment	84
Selection of Participants	84
Ethical Considerations	87
Triangulation of Data	88
Summary of Research Goals	90
Data Analysis	94
 IV. STUDY PARTICIPANTS	 99
Description of Student Participants	99
Individual Background Description of Student and Parent Participants	103
Mo and Louise	103
RJ	104
Sarah	105
Jaylen	106
Carmen and Rachel	107
Heaven and Jane	108
Bianca	109
Darkwing and Karen	110
Joshua and Mary	111
Summary of Student and Parent Descriptions	113
Background Description of Teacher Participants	114
Rebecca	114
Ramona	115
Paul	116
Principal Clark	117

Summary of Teacher Participant and Principal Descriptions	118
Student Interview Process	119
Parent Interview Process	119
Teacher Questionnaire Process	121
 V. DATA ANALYSIS: SCHOOLING, LEARNING, AND THEIR IMPORTANCE TO STUDENTS	 123
High Quality Teaching and Learning	124
Student Performance	133
Transitioning between Schools	143
Class Size	153
Impressions about School Quality	157
 VI. DATA ANALYSIS: A CLIMATE OF RELATIONSHIPS	 165
Principal Behaviors	166
Bullying	168
Parent and Teacher Interactions	175
Relationships	180
Stress in Schools	182
Race	183
Summary	190
 VII. RESEARCH FINDINGS	 195
The Purpose of Schools	195
High Quality Teaching and Learning	196
High Student Performance	199
The Opportunity to Choose	203
The Understood Value of Education	205
Transitioning between Schools	206
Class Size	210
Impressions about School Quality	212
Needs of Students in Schools	215
Responsive Principal Behaviors	215
Parent and Teacher Interactions	218
Caring Relationships	220
 VIII. THE ABSENCE OF RACE	 225
The Absence of Race	228
Implications and Recommendations	233

Bell's (1980) Interest-Conversion Construct	234
Cultural Sensitivity	238
Conclusions	240
REFERENCES	245
APPENDIX A. UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO CONSENT FOR A MINOR TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG FORM.....	284
APPENDIX B. UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT	288
APPENDIX C. STUDENT ACADEMIC RECORDS REVIEW	291
APPENDIX D. STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE	293
APPENDIX E. PARENT TELEPHONE INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE.....	296
APPENDIX F. TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE.....	298
APPENDIX G. TEACHER PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS	300
APPENDIX H. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE	302

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1. Student Participant Description	99
Table 2. Public Schools Participants Attended Prior to Enrolling at Success Academy	101
Table 3. Parent Participant Descriptions.....	120
Table 4. Categories of Focus Cited by Research Study Participants	120

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework	53
Figure 2. Triangulation of Data Collection and Analysis	89
Figure 3. Methodology	95
Figure 4. Recurring Categories of Focus	96
Figure 5. Four Themes	97
Figure 6. Data Analysis: Schooling, Learning, and Importance to Students	123
Figure 7. Data Analysis: A Climate of Relationships	166
Figure 8. CRT Focus on Barriers to Disadvantaged Black Middle School Student Success	189
Figure 9. Research Implications	241

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001*, signed into law on January 8, 2002 by President George Bush, expanded the federal government's role in public education by setting specific requirements for public schools to meet the needs of disadvantaged students. It was designed to hold schools more accountable for student achievement by requiring states to develop policies to ensure all students in grades three through eight are tested and proficient in reading and math, that teachers are highly qualified, that schools provide report cards of progress for the public, and that school funding is reallocated to schools and districts with more poor children. The law also gives parents the choice to move their children to another school when their children's Title I school does not make Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs), formerly Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), over two consecutive years. Title I schools are schools with a large percentage of low-income students, thereby qualifying them for federal funding to support students in making academic achievement as measured by AMOs. AMOs are the federal government's measure that students within a school are performing well according to the state's academic accountability formula.

The goals of NCLB are to improve the quality of education, provide equal opportunity for all students, and eliminate differences among diverse group student achievement outcomes. Proponents of NCLB cite the rigorous academic standards and

accountability of teachers and students along with the incentives and sanctions for performance as the hallmarks of success. Reductions in the achievement gap by concentrating on the analysis by subgroups of annual testing data is supported as a way to expose academic deficiencies of disadvantaged students and to bring performance up to that of more advantaged peers, thus closing the achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children (Cobb, Bifulco, & Bell, 2009; Mickelson & Southworth, 2005). The sanctions imposed by NCLB reveal educational disparity, making it a national priority to level the playing field of opportunity for all students. However, decreasing the ever-present achievement gap in this country has not been an outcome that NCLB proponents can report (Benson, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hahnel, 2009; Hursh, 2007; White, Loker, March, & Sockslager, 2009; Wiley, Mathis, & Garcia, 2005). Issues with regard to academic achievement of disadvantaged Black students still create a chasm between the haves and the have-nots in this country that has not yet been solved.

Background of the Study

Disadvantaged Black students' academic performance has not reached that of White and middle-class students. The achievement gap has continued despite federal involvement and individual state plans. As measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments, "In 2009, the 8th-grade reading achievement gap between White and Black students was 26 points and the gap between White and Hispanic students was 24 points; neither gap was measurably different from the corresponding gaps in 2007 or 1992" (Aud et al., 2010, p. 46). Additionally, "In 2009, the mathematics achievement gap between White and Black 8th-graders was 32 points;

this was not measurably different from the gap in 2007 or 1990” (Aud et al., 2010, p. 50). Thus, the achievement gap between White and Black students remains a challenge for educators.

While the U.S. Declaration of Independence grants all American citizens certain “unalienable Rights” (1776, para. 2), equal opportunity to get a quality education in this country has eluded many, yet the ability to access a quality education is the key to “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” (1776, para. 2). In a world in which students must be able to compete on a global scale, access to a quality education unlocks the door to opportunities and is in essence the linchpin to freedom. “During his recent historic campaign for the presidency, Barack Obama described the large race-and class-based achievement gaps we experience as ‘morally unacceptable and economically untenable’” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 3). To turn a blind eye to a whole group of youth not being prepared for life in the 21st century is to ignore the lifeblood of this country. It is important to remember that all students and their contribution to the world matter regardless of the student’s race or socioeconomic status.

This research study identifies a small group of disadvantaged Black students attending a small, urban charter middle school that will be called Success Academy. It also seeks to better understand perceptions of the factors that positively and negatively influence the student participants’ educational experiences from their own account, their parents’, and their teachers’. Moreover, it seeks to gain insight into the instructional, organizational, social, or cultural attributes that motivate the student participants to be invested in their education. In order to glean an understanding of these perspectives, this

study highlights the educational issues surrounding disadvantaged Black middle school students, the history of Black student education in the U.S., and the history of charter schools in the U.S. and in North Carolina. Moreover, the instructional, organizational, social, and cultural attributes that impact the educational experiences of students who might otherwise have been left behind in their traditional public schools but chose a charter school education is examined from the perspectives of the case study student participants, along with five of their parents and three of their teachers.

Background of the Research Study Setting

Success Academy is small charter school located in a large, urban city in North Carolina, just off a very busy highway. The school campuses are nestled away at the end of a major thoroughfare that partially secludes them from the rest of the busy commercial district that surrounds them on one side. On two of the other sides of the school are neighborhoods with many single-family dwellings and one side is totally wooded. There is no throughway traffic beyond the school so the natural geography of the location is a great setting for promoting a quiet, safe, and secure school setting.

The school is a K-8 school yet runs two separate campuses. The K-5 campus is located across the street from the middle school and is housed in a separate building. The middle school, the setting for this research study is located within a large church complex. The school's administrative offices are on the same hallway as the church's administrative offices and the cafeteria is a church multi-purpose room with a baptismal pool in one section where the stage is located.

Success Academy is a Title I school that follows a traditional school calendar. Federal Title One funds are afforded to schools with more than 40% of students on free and reduced lunch. The funds are used with other school funds to improve the instructional program for schools with high poverty rates. Ninety-four percent of the students attending Success Academy identify themselves as Black, 2% identify as Multiracial, 2% identify as Hispanic, and 2% identify as White. Eighty-three percent of students qualify for the federal free and reduced lunch program, an indicator of the high poverty level of students.

According to the 2013 U. S. Census in the city (United States Census Bureau, 2015), the population was 279,639, with a 4% increase over 2010. Additionally, the per capita money income in the past 12 months in this city was \$25, 961 as compared with the U.S. per capita money income in the past 12 months of \$28,155. The median household income for 2009-2013 was \$41,120 as compared to \$53,046 nationally. Moreover, the percent of persons below the poverty level for 2009–2013 was 20.3% as compared to the national percent of persons below the poverty level of 15.4%. Finally, the percent of persons age 25+ and a high school graduate for 2009–2013 was 87.7%, when nationally that percentage is 86%. Comparing these demographics to that of the U.S. reflects a city that faces socioeconomic challenges. These challenges not only impact the city but also impact the schools and the students who attend them.

Success Academy is a charter school and as such it has greater flexibility than traditional public schools. One such area of flexibility is with transportation. The school does not provide transportation for its students. Thus, parents are responsible for getting

students to and from school each day. The school provides lunch but there are very limited choices or options for students. There is no choice about the lunch plate. Students may, however, have a choice about whether to take the fruit offered that day. Because the cafeteria is not a traditional cafeteria, the setup is totally different with regards to the serving line. It is a small single serve station that does not allow for many options. This is quite different from traditional public schools that provide transportation daily for all students and that provide a variety of lunch options for students in a traditional cafeteria setting.

The school setting is very small and the middle school students share a hallway with third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students. The media center is extremely small and is much smaller than a classroom with only one table with chairs and a desk with a phone. The media center could not house more than 15 students at any one time. The lack of adequate resources is very concerning since students attending Success need every possible advantage to ensure their academic experiences prepares them with the skills needed to be prepared for college and careers.

Success offers students several extracurricular activities like the Beta Club for academics. It also offers sports and clubs. Students participate in after-school clubs specifically designed to focus on community service for the elderly and on developing character and self-esteem. Some clubs specifically target young ladies with a focus on developing leadership. Other clubs target young men. Sports are a big part of students' lives. Students are even recruited to play sports at Success.

Students attending Success Academy wear uniforms. They wear khakis and their shirts were black or white. Students could wear black or white tennis shoes. On game days, players were required to wear dress clothes. On select days students were permitted to pay to dress casually for a fundraiser.

Principal Clark is the leader of Success Academy. She is a Black female who serves both as the principal and the director of the school. She also serves both campuses. The staff is small with 22 full-time teachers serving all K–8 students and the majority of the teachers are Black. There are 244 students in grades K–8, with 92 students served in Grades 6–8.

Organization of the Study

This research study is presented in eight chapters. Chapter I includes the background of the study, the research setting, statement of the problem, purpose, and significance of the study. In order to delineate the conceptualization of the researcher, the definition of terms and positionality of the researcher will be explained. Finally, the research questions, limitations, delimitations, and the assumptions of the study (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008) will be presented.

Chapter II presents a review of the literature, including the historical background of charter schools in the U.S. and in North Carolina. Additionally, the conceptual framework is introduced. The conceptual framework is the scaffold used to approach every aspect of this research study. It is comprised of critical race theory (CRT) and the instructional, organizational, social, and cultural attributes of charter schools. How the conceptual framework creates the framework for approaching the data collection and data

analysis is emphasized. Chapter III describes the methodology for this study. It includes the research design, participant recruitment, data collection, summary of the research goals, and the data analysis procedures employed.

The description of the participants is discussed in Chapter IV. Chapter V includes the analysis of the recurring categories of focus that led to the identification of the first two themes—the purpose of schools and the understood value of education. The recurring categories of focus that led to the emergence of the two themes rich with the narratives of the research participants is presented. Analysis that resulted from the data synthesis through the students', their parents', and their teachers' own voices is included. Chapter VI includes the analysis of recurring categories of focus that led to the two remaining themes—needs of students in schools and the absence of race.

Chapter VII presents the research study findings for the first three themes—purpose of schools, understood value of education, and needs of students in schools. The research study concludes with Chapter VIII as the researcher's perspective is incorporated into the findings on the final theme, the absence of race. Implications for researchers and policymakers are shared and final conclusions.

Statement of the Problem

Disadvantaged Black students in the U.S. have faced a troubling past and an even more uncertain future. Issues surrounding the education of students of poverty and minorities are complex due to the history of racial segregation in this country, parental experiences and attitudes about schooling, educators' beliefs and expectations about educating disadvantaged Black students, and students' attitudes toward schooling.

Further compounding matters is the prevailing inequality in resources, funding, and achievement of schools despite government influence.

School choice options vary greatly in the United States. Research regarding charter schools, and specifically charter schools that are experiencing success with low-income Black students, is limited. A focus on determining the effectiveness of charter schools on all students, but especially disadvantaged Black students who have most often been neglected in our educational system, is needed. Additionally, more research is needed to identify the strategies and attributes of effective charter schools with disadvantaged Black middle school students. Research exists on educator and parent perspectives with regards to charter schools. However, a dearth of research exists from middle school students' perspective.

Charter schools as an option for educational delivery has come under much scrutiny. This research explores charter schools as an option for the Black middle school student participants in this case study while focusing on perceptions as to how the charter school environment in a small, urban charter middle school in North Carolina has positively or negatively impacted their educational experiences. Moreover, the instructional, organizational, social, and cultural attributes that impact the students' investment in their education are uncovered. Examining middle school students' perceptions regarding their educational experiences is largely uncharted territory, because Black disadvantaged students are largely absent from the research but it is important insight for educators and policymakers to better understand the consumers of the educational services provided them. Furthermore, perceptions of the participants'

parents and teachers also add additional breadth and depth to understanding the student participants' educational experiences.

Disadvantaged Students

Historically education has been considered a pathway to economic success.

Education is perceived as the “great equalizer” (Mann, 1848, para. 6) between children of poverty and children born into affluence. Thomas Jefferson argues,

I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised, for the preservation of freedom and happiness . . . [The Education Act is] to avail the commonwealth of those talents and virtues which nature has sown as liberally among the rich, and which are lost to their country by the want of means for their cultivation. (as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 27)

The burgeoning middle class once saw a bright hope that working hard and learning a lot in school would afford one the opportunity to realize the American dream. There was great pride in education and the belief that education could enable one to move up the economic and social ladder towards success.

Today, the pervasive inequality that exists in schools creates a distinct barrier to equalizing the path to educational and economic success for all. Berlinger (2009) cites,

Overall, fewer than 4% of white students and less than a tenth of Asian students—in contrast to 40% of black and Latino students—attend schools where 70-100% of the children are poor. The many dimensions of intense, concentrated, and isolated poverty that shapes the lives of students and families often dominate these schools. While most whites and almost half of Asians attend schools with 0-30% poor students, that is true for only one-sixth of blacks and one-fifth of Latinos. (p. 8)

Concentrations of disadvantaged children in schools create distinctive challenges schools must address in order to meet the academic needs of students. Dobbie and Fryer (2011) state, “. . . One-third to one-half of the [achievement] gap can be explained by family-environment indicators. In this scenario, combating poverty and having more constructive out-of-school time may lead to better and more-focused instruction in school” (p. 159). Thus, schools must also address non-school issues in order to help close the achievement gap for disadvantaged students (Berlinger, 2009).

Murray and Zvoch (2011) state, “African American youth are approximately three times as likely as White youth to live in poverty, and the links between poverty, stress, and developmental outcomes are well established” (p. 494). Therefore, schools must find a way to meet disadvantaged Black students’ needs despite non-school factors. Supportive teacher and student relationships are one means of meeting student needs (Haycock, 2013; Howe & Covell, 2013; Murray & Zvoch, 2011; O’Connor & McCartney, 2007). Haycock (2013) further states,

Let me be clear. It would help if changes were made outside of schools, too: if parents spent more time with their children, if poverty didn’t crush so many spirits, and if the broader culture didn’t bombard young people with so many destructive messages. But because both research and experience show that what schools do matters greatly, I’ll concentrate on what works in education. (p. 92)

What works in education for disadvantaged Black students is a question that parents, educators, and policymakers alike would like to know the answer to. However, for the purposes of this inquiry, a case study of disadvantaged Black middle school students

illuminates perceptions of one small, urban charter middle school's efforts to help them be successful academically.

Disadvantaged students have concerns that make them a unique group to educate and in turn make the American dream more difficult to achieve. Disadvantaged students often present with a lack of exposure to educational experiences and activities that better prepare middle class students for academic success. This lack of exposure may come from a low-income home, having parents with limited educational experiences, or a community plagued by poverty and a culture where school is unimportant.

. . . Children living in poverty tend to spend less time finding out about the world around them and more time struggling to survive within it. Poor children have fewer and less-supportive networks than their more affluent counterparts do; live in neighborhoods that are lower in social capital; and, as adolescents, are more likely to rely on peers than on cognitive-enrichment opportunities. They have fewer books at home, visit the library less often, and spend considerably more time watching TV than their middle-income counterparts do. (Kumanyika & Grier, 2006, p. 187)

Moreover, "Studies of risk and resilience in children have shown that family income correlates significantly with children's academic success . . ." (Jensen, 2009, p. 10).

Subsequently, some researchers and theorists posit that educational equality will not be realized until social and economic equality is fulfilled (Slavin & Madden, 2002).

While issues like social and economic equality matter, we must also take into account the impact highly qualified teachers and focused intervention can have on academic achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Haycock, 2013; Schmoker, 2011; Slavin & Madden, 2002; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2002). Therefore, I make the assertion that the perceptions and experiences disadvantaged Black students have with

schooling and academic achievement vary from mainstream America, and that it is necessary to view disadvantaged Black middle school students' perceptions about charter schools from a lens that takes this perspective into account. Failure to do so results in a deficient view of education as we know it in North Carolina and America.

Black Students

Prior to 1865, Black students were relatively nonexistent, since educating Blacks during this time was a direct violation of state laws created to maintain slavery. There were a few exceptions in which sympathetic missionaries or reformers educated Blacks or some masters educated Blacks in an attempt to better their laborers. Furthermore, during this time period in history, Blacks were considered mentally inferior to Whites. With the end of slavery, Blacks pursued education with more determination but the school systems successfully restricted their educational attainment with laws preventing equal access (Berry & Asamen, 1989). *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) was decided, which enabled Blacks to go to school in a "separate but equal" context, but the conditions and lack of resources for these schools created unequal conditions and access, resulting in an era of activism for Black students with the outcry to end segregated schools.

Many Americans fought and lost their lives in the pursuit of equal access to public education, which is considered one of the most fundamental rights of a democracy. The pursuit for a free and public education however has been plagued with controversy, violence, and legislative action. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) challenged the issue of constitutionality of segregation in public schools, further elevated the argument that segregated schools were in violation of the equal protection clause of the 14th

Amendment, and successfully made the case that unraveled the “separate but equal” doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) provided the legal justification for Black students to attend White schools due to the substandard conditions of Black schools when compared to schools White students attended. However, with the “all deliberate speed” doctrine, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was a slow and drawn out process that took more than a decade for states like North Carolina to comply with integration.

Many legal battles followed; sit-ins, demonstrations, and boycotts occurred for the right to co-exist educationally. Yet, 61 years later transformative leaders, elected officials, researchers, students, and parents still grapple with inequitable funding, facilities, and access to high quality, rigorous, and innovative curriculum and instruction by highly qualified teachers.

Everyone knows that the American school system is in crisis and that its students do particularly badly in science and math, year after year, in international rankings. But the statistics here, while not wrong, reveal something different. America’s real problem is one not of excellence but of access. (Zakaria, 2008, p. 191)

Students may have choices, but those choices are controlled by unfair housing practices that limit their ability to choose low poverty schools. When you live in a high poverty neighborhood, chances are high that you will attend a high poverty school (Misra, 2015). Thus, access to a high quality school when you are poor and Black in America is limited. In essence, the right to learn is still a fundamental right that evades many and limits America’s ability to maintain its edge in the global marketplace.

Today, the middle class is shrinking, the gap between the wealthy and the poor has widened, and educational inequities present a challenge for equal access, opportunity, and optimism that schools across the country are providing the best possible education for all students in the U. S. to be globally competitive (Darling-Hammond, 2010). At the same time the U. S. continues to become more diverse the old debate remains. CBS News (2010) reports,

About 83 percent of the U. S. population growth since 2000 was minority, part of a trend that will see minorities become the majority by midcentury. Across all large metro areas, the majority of the child population is now nonwhite. (para. 17)

Furthermore, these students are likely attending a predominantly minority failing school.

This struggle has played out in each historical era for racial/ethnic minority groups, new immigrants, and the poor, surfacing in decisions about whom to educate, with what resources, where and how, and toward what ends. This debate is even more relevant today, as preparation for thinking work is the prerequisite for productive engagement in our economy and society. (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 28)

The effects of slavery and discrimination still impede educational progress for American children through issues of race with regards to student assignment and school choices for parents. Moreover, Kahlenburg (2000) states, “As the United States grows more ethnically diverse, the traditional tools for promoting school integration are becoming less and less potent” (p. 17). Thus, educators must find new and creative means to meet the needs of disadvantaged Black students in all educational settings.

Haycock (2013) states, “Ample evidence shows that almost all students can achieve at high levels if they are taught at high levels. But equally clear is that some students require more time and more instruction” (p. 94). The inability of educators to meet the needs of disadvantaged Black students in traditional public schools results in increasing dropout rates and a drain on society as we seek ways to support citizens underprepared for the world of work they are expected to enter. Dropping out of school happens much sooner than when a student enters high school. Guggenheim (2010) references Dr. Robert Balfanz at Johns Hopkins University who calls many failing schools in America “dropout factories.” Failing elementary and middle schools that feed into high schools graduating fewer than 40% of students are considered dropout factories, because these underprepared students will likely spend less than two years in the high schools they are assigned before they dropout to a potential life of crime, welfare, and substance abuse.

The outcomes of failing to provide poor Black students a quality education include becoming a dropout, being underprepared for the world of work, decreased earning potential, the inability to compete in a globally competitive world, a potential life of crime followed by prison, welfare dependency, substance abuse, and a continual perpetuation of the cycle of poverty. These outcomes not only threaten to drain our economy; moreover, to capitulate to inequity is to accept the death knell of our competitiveness in the world. Racial inequality, class, and language inequities result in the value of students being discounted and create a disparate educational climate in which some are privileged and others are disadvantaged.

The result of these inequities is the increasing number of dropouts lacking job skills, economic prospects, and a stable future. If we do not reverse the trends of increasing numbers of Black students dropping out of school and proceeding on the path to prison we are in fact sentencing ourselves to our own democratic, humanistic, and economic demise. Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2002) explain,

To ignore the racial gap in academic achievement is to neglect black youth, which is criminal negligence. Education has become the key to racial equality. Equal earnings depend on equal skills. And thus, if the current drive for educational reform does not raise black test scores, it will have failed. If black youngsters remain second-class students, they will be second-class citizens—a racially identifiable and enduring group of have-nots. (p. 131)

This research study focuses on the unique educational concerns surrounding the case study participants. Because disadvantaged Black, middle school students have unique issues with regard to educational achievement and closing the achievement gap, it is particularly important to better understand their experiences in their own words and the voices of those who know them best, their parents and teachers. Gaining insight into their understandings of the traditional public schools they attended and their current charter school based on the factors that positively or negatively influenced their educational experiences will be explored. In the next section, the purpose of the study is explained: to examine a small, urban, charter middle school as one school choice option for disadvantaged Black male and female students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is three-fold. This study is designed to: (a) explore the history of charter schools as a school choice option for disadvantaged Black middle

school students by examining the history of charter schools in North Carolina; (b) add to the body of literature regarding charter schools and their impact on the educational experiences of a small group of disadvantaged Black middle school students attending a small, urban charter school; and (c) examine perceptions as to what factors positively or negatively influence the student participants' educational experiences and how the instructional, organizational, social, and cultural attributes of schools influence their investment in their education.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to develop a better understanding of the nuances that disadvantaged Black middle school students bring to educational settings. Because disadvantaged Black students underperform White students resulting in the achievement gap, better ways of reaching these students is an important element to improving education for all students. Current research that links charter schools with a quality education is limited (Archbald, 2004; Belfield & Levin, 2002; Carnoy, Jacobson, Mishel, & Rothstein, 2005; Cobb & Glass, 2009; Holmes, DeSimone, & Rupp, 2003; Miners, 2009; Scott & Villavicencio, 2009; Wolf, 2011; Zimmer et al., 2009) but given the ever increasing number of charter schools, it is important for policymakers, educators, parents, consumers, and the public to be able to make informed decisions about how charter schools impact student school experiences. Moreover, there are a few charter school studies that indicate some positive results with disadvantaged Black students and more research into these charter schools and the strategies employed for student success is needed (Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, Pathak, & Walters, 2010; Betts, Rice, Zau, Tang, &

Koedel, 2006; Booker, Gilpatric, Gronberg, & Jansen, 2007; Clark, Gleason, Tuttle, & Silverberg, 2011; Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, Dwoyer, & Silverberg, 2010; Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009). Consequently, Gleason et al. (2010) state,

We found that the characteristics of the students served by study charter schools were strongly related to the schools' impacts on student achievement, particularly in math. Schools serving the largest proportions of disadvantaged and lower achieving students had more positive and statistically significant impacts; schools serving the smallest proportions of these students had negative and statistically significant impacts. (p. xxvii)

However, it should be noted that the impact on reading achievement was negative. The inconsistency in charter school results is perplexing and with the newness of charter school delivery in North Carolina for the state's most at-risk students, a focused and comprehensive look at the effects of charter schools on disadvantaged Black middle school students' academic achievement and educational experiences is warranted. In order to ensure that disadvantaged Black students are afforded the best possible education available to them, a focused look at one small, urban charter middle school and its impact on the student participants in this case study is the objective.

Significance of the Case Study

Charter schools are a relatively new educational delivery setting in North Carolina. The demographics of charter schools in North Carolina also vary. This case study focuses on a small group of disadvantaged Black middle school students that previously attended traditional public schools but now attend a small, urban charter middle school. This study seeks to better understand why student participants are now experiencing success in their new charter middle school environment when they weren't

in their previous traditional public schools. Furthermore, an interest in gaining insight into the unique set of characteristics of this particular charter middle school including the instructional, organizational, social, and cultural attributes and their potential affect on student experiences fuels this study. Consequently, the definition of student success is examined because the definition derived from the research participants is not the traditional definition educators, policymakers, and researchers might expect. However, understanding the educational experiences from the students, their parents, and teachers provides a glimpse into what's important for schools according to key stakeholders.

Examining the student participants' perceptions of their former traditional public schools and their current charter school on academic achievement is a different focus from examining charter schools from teachers' or parents' perspectives. Because students are the consumers of education and the ones who must make the choice to be engaged and productive in school, it is valuable to learn more about their thoughts on their educational landscape. It is important to consider students' thoughts about their former traditional public schools as well as their current charter school since these students have experienced both settings. This research study seeks to learn from the middle school students themselves why they and their parents sought a different educational choice resulting in their enrollment in a small, urban charter middle school. Moreover, adding an additional dimension to the research study is the inclusion of the perspectives of the parents and teachers that know the students best. These perspectives also help to clarify the educational experiences the student participants have at Success Academy and why they think it is a good option for them.

This study is designed to better understand the perspectives of disadvantaged Black middle school students who were attending traditional public school settings but are now successful in a charter school setting. Gaining insight into the students' reasons for this change in academic motivation or investment in learning while attending Success Academy is explored. The proposition that the student participants are now experiencing success and what that success looks like is particularly interesting, and a distinction that educators, parents, and policymakers alike could benefit from. Understanding more about the characteristics of the Black middle school student participants and what created a desire for them to self-report they are succeeding academically in a charter school setting, is an area of research that is lacking and is an important piece of the educational puzzle. To further clarify the significance of the study, the next section defines the terms to be used throughout this case study.

Definition of Terms

This study utilizes several educational terms that warrant explanation to eliminate confusion and misinterpretation. Additionally, it is important to differentiate specific reasons for the use of certain terms and definitions rather than others because meaning making is determined by understanding the conceptualization of the researcher and the conceptual constructs implied. Therefore, for the purposes of this case study, definitions related to entities, participants, and the attributes studied are further defined.

Academic Achievement

Researchers define academic achievement in various ways. For the purposes of this study, academic achievement is defined by each of the participant's individual

reading and math levels as measured by their academic grades on their report cards and when available their individual student score reports on their End of Grade (EOGs) test results for their previous academic years while attending traditional public schools and Success Academy. Therefore, the individual participants' reading and math achievement levels were examined two different ways: 1) as a snapshot of student performance on their EOGs and 2) as an ongoing reflection of their academic performance over time as evidenced by their school report cards.

A records review was conducted as one piece of data collection to analyze student achievement as aforementioned. Moreover, grades and EOG scores were but one piece of academic achievement as considered by the researcher. Academic achievement by the student participants in this study was also measured by their own stories and self-report and those of their parents that reflected motivation to succeed in school, their thoughts about their futures, and their engagement and involvement in school. All of these factors—grades, test results, motivation, resilience, and involvement in school are all important elements used to determine academic achievement, academic success or positive educational experiences of the disadvantaged Black, middle school students in this case study.

Middle School Students

Middle school students are typically students in grades six through eight. For the purposes of this research study, the selected research participants are disadvantaged Black students in grades six through eight who previously attended traditional public schools but now attend a small, urban charter middle school. I made the decision to

conduct this research study with student participants from the middle grades because middle school students have a distinct and unique perspective due to the very volatile and unpredictable nature of middle school and adolescence. Middle school is such a critical time in a student's life because this is the period of time when students are developing their personality and their perceptions about life while simultaneously discovering where they fit in the social and cultural pecking order in school. While tracking for high school begins as early as kindergarten in some schools, middle school is often the first time students are ability grouped in classes for instruction. These tracking practices set some students up for school success and some students are left behind without hope of ever catching up (Burris & Garrity, 2008).

School Success

School success is a criterion largely related to one's self-concept and social context. Finn and Rock (1997) explain,

. . . if a student holds a positive self-view and routinely exhibits these behaviors in their positive forms—for example, attends school regularly, participates in extracurricular activities, completes required work in school and out—these may serve as protective mechanisms that improve a student's chances of school success in spite of being a member of a risk group. This phenomenon has been termed *resilience*, that is 'successful adaptation to life trials in the face of social disadvantage or highly adverse conditions.' (p. 222)

Therefore, school success is a criterion that recognizes a student's behaviors related to school but also encompasses a larger context including their social environment and interactions. It is perceived that a disadvantaged Black student's ability to navigate

his/her home and community environment while also maintaining academic performance in the school environment indicates s/he is experiencing school success.

The student participants' school success was examined through individual interviews with participants regarding their behaviors inside and outside of school. Additionally, observations of the students in their school setting were conducted over a three-month span of time. Moreover, participants' teachers were surveyed using a Google form questionnaire and parents were interviewed by phone to gain more meaning of the social context surrounding the students. Finally, school success was explored through the students' interactions in a focus group. It is hoped that through these case study methods a better understanding of the students' social milieu and contributions to academic achievement will emerge.

School Challenges or Difficulties

One basic tenet of this study was that the disadvantaged Black middle school students selected as participants in the study experienced school challenges or difficulties at their former traditional public schools resulting in their transfer to the charter school. Therefore, it is very important to define the meaning of school challenges or difficulties. School challenges or difficulties are being defined in a multifaceted way. Participants' grades and EOG scores from their prior years in traditional public school were examined through a records review conducted by the researcher, but also a basic postulation is that these students had negative educational experiences in their prior educational setting from the students' and their parents' stories and self report.

Graham (1989) contends, “Far too many minority children perform poorly in school not because they lack basic intellectual capacities or specific learning skills but because they have low expectations, feel hopeless, lack interest, or give up in the face of potential failure” (p. 40). Darensbourg & Blake (2013) expound that a students’ values and behavioral engagement in school is linked to their achievement or lack thereof. Therefore, this study examined disadvantaged Black middle school students’ grades and EOG results but also assessed students’ perceptions about their school experiences through self-report and through the interviews of parents and teachers.

End of Grade Tests (EOGs)

End of Grade Tests (EOGs) in North Carolina are the testing and accountability measure established by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to determine a student’s proficiency on the content taught from the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. For the purposes of this study, reading and math were the only content areas examined, however, EOGs are administered to middle school students in science for grade eight and Measures of Student Learning or (MSLs) are locally administered to students in the science and social studies content areas for students not required to be tested in these areas for accountability purposes. Rather, MSLs are administered for a teacher accountability measure.

During the 2012–2013 academic year, the North Carolina State Board of Education adopted the READY Accountability model to replace the ABCs of Public Education. The READY Accountability model reflects the higher standards of the Common Core Standards in reading and math and was adopted to meet the federal

requirements of NCLB. Thus, when examining the EOG scores for students, it must be noted that accountability reports prior to the 2012-2013 school year reflected the old standards under the ABCs of Public Education. Beginning with the 2012-2013 academic year, standards were much more rigorous and the entire state, as well as many schools and school districts experienced a decline in EOG results (North Carolina Public Schools, 2013). Consequently, EOG results were previously reported on a 1—4 scale. Beginning with the 2013-2014 school year, EOG scores in North Carolina are reported as 1—5. Students scoring level 4 or 5 are considered proficient on the college and career readiness standards (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction/Division of Accountability Services, 2014).

Charter Schools

The term charter schools are used to refer to public schools established based on the founders' application for a charter to address specific criteria. The establishment of charter schools and the criteria for operating in North Carolina is specified within NC General Statute 115C Article 14 A. Charter school founders generally apply for the charter on the grounds that they will provide a different educational opportunity for students than is already being provided by traditional public schools. In North Carolina, charter schools are public schools funded by the North Carolina legislature. However, charter schools enjoy the freedom to create their own curricula, personnel requirements, and operational practices (Chen, 2009; Imberman, 2011; Moe & Chubb, 2009; Scott & Villavicencio, 2009; WestEd, 2006). It is also important to note that for this study virtual charter schools were not included in this definition of charter schools.

Disadvantaged Students

Low-income students, poor students, disadvantaged students, and students of poverty were used interchangeably throughout this research study. While there are many definitions for low-income students, disadvantaged students, and students of poverty, this study was originally designed to presuppose that disadvantaged students meet the guidelines for the federal free and reduced lunch program. The free and reduced lunch program is most often used as an indicator for the level or degree of poverty in a school as the percentage of free and reduced lunch students is used for federal qualifications for Title I resources. Moreover, Nelson, Rosenberg, and Van Meter (2004) state, “Eligibility for free and reduced-price lunches is determined by students’ family income in relation to the federally established poverty level” (p. 5). While the free and reduced lunch measure was intended to be the criterion for low-income students for this research study, it is important to note that for the purposes of this research study, the free and reduced lunch criterion was not used solely because I was not privy to the free and reduced lunch status of students. Not only was this information unavailable to the researcher but also was inaccessible to the school administrator of Success Academy.

The Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), which administers the National School Lunch Program is a part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The FNS prohibits divulgence of individual student’s free and reduced lunch status with the following exceptions: (a) to enforce *No Child Left Behind*, (b) to persons directly connected to the administration of the free and reduced lunch program (FRLP), (c) to administer the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), and (d) to state

assessment programs like the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. However, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction grants information regarding individual student's free and reduced lunch status to district Testing Coordinators/Directors for local assessment purposes (Hoffman, 2012; NCDPI/Accountability Services, 2014).

The free and reduced lunch status was strictly confidential and inaccessible to the researcher. Therefore, for the purposes of this case study, I was unable to secure the individual free and reduced lunch status for Success students and thereby could not use the free and reduced lunch criterion to establish a pool of participants classified as disadvantaged Black students. Subsequently, the school administrator at Success Academy created the established pool of disadvantaged students for participant recruitment purposes. The recruitment pool was created based on the administrator's knowledge of the families within the school with consideration of a cross section of the student body in mind and without utilizing the actual free and reduced lunch classification.

The researcher attempted to negate the issue of not having a more defined criteria for student participants through a focus on the educational experiences of the students since they attend a high poverty charter middle school. All students attending Success Academy attend a high poverty school due to the high percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch rate. Because all of the students attending Success Academy attend a high poverty school with 84% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch, I considered them disadvantaged because of the inherent challenges of attending a high

poverty school in a high poverty urban school community. High poverty schools are typically underfunded as compared to low poverty schools (Misra, 2015). Moreover, the lack of resources as a result of attending a high poverty middle school puts the student participants at a disadvantage over students in schools with more resources as a result. Misra (2015) calls it “concentrated disadvantage: the children who need the most are concentrated in schools least likely to have the resources to meet those needs” (para. 5).

With that distinction, the researcher proceeded with the research study and concluded that the data collection and data analysis would still add to the body of literature on disadvantaged Black middle school students attending a charter school. Moreover, the perceptions of educational experiences as a result of being a disadvantaged Black student, attending a predominantly Black and high poverty school, is a valuable contribution to the research.

It is important to note that the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) recently reported that disadvantaged students are the new majority in southern and western schools. North Carolina is one of those states with a reported 50.2% of low-income students in schools in North Carolina (The Southern Education Foundation, 2013). Moreover, with this development, it is especially important for all educators to know how to decrease the still prevalent achievement gap between low income and higher income students.

High Poverty Schools

High poverty schools are determined by the percentage of a school's student enrollment that is eligible for free or reduced lunch (FRPL) by the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

High-poverty schools are those where 76–100 percent of students are eligible for FRPL and low-poverty schools are those where 0–25 percent of students are eligible. Twenty percent of public elementary schools and 9 percent of public secondary schools in the United States are high-poverty using this definition. (Aud et al., 2010, p. 3)

Eighty-four percent of the students at Success Academy are on free and reduced lunch.

Sass, Hannaway, Xu, Figlio, and Feng (2012) purport that based on their research using data from Florida and North Carolina, that teachers in high poverty schools were on average less effective than low poverty schools but only slightly less effective.

Additionally, the variance in the level of teachers and their effectiveness was greater in high poverty schools, which indicates that students attending high poverty schools have a higher likelihood of getting a less effective teacher than if they attended a low poverty school.

North Carolina students attending a high poverty school are more likely to be attending a D or F school, while students attending schools where there are more higher income students are more likely attending a school with an A or B according to the North Carolina accountability system's A-F school letter grades (Bonner & Hui, 2015; Public Schools of NC, State Board of Education, & Department of Public Instruction, 2015; L. Wagner, 2015). These school grades reflect student accountability results based on end

of grade tests and student growth over time as measured by the North Carolina READY End of Grade assessments. Moreover, poor school grades create negative public opinion about the quality of the school, the teachers, and the students thereby potentially hurting the school's ability to attract the best and brightest teachers. Therefore, I concluded that because Success Academy scored a letter grade of D and is a high poverty school, students attending Success Academy are disadvantaged. Success students may have a higher likelihood of getting a less effective teacher and as a result, may not be getting the same caliber of education as their peers attending a low poverty school.

Traditional Public Schools

Traditional public schools were used to refer to public schools under the jurisdiction of local education agencies (LEAs) or local school boards and the North Carolina State Board of Education. Traditional public schools follow the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and are governed and guided by North Carolina legislation. The state board of education, legislators, and local school boards that create policies for governance make regulations and decisions regarding budgets, teacher preparation, curriculum, evaluation, school improvement, and operational guidelines externally.

This portion of the study was dedicated to the explanation of terms used throughout the research study. The purpose behind these definitions is to clarify the assumptions made by the researcher when applying terminology to the research study design and analysis. The next section of the study addresses the positionality of the researcher, which is an important element to the overall research study and design.

My Positionality as Researcher

School choice is a particular topic of interest to me as a researcher because in examining the research surrounding school choice options, what surfaces is resurgence to segregated schools. I am a middle school principal in a small rural district in the county in which I grew up. I have seen first hand the devastating financial effects that charter schools have on public school districts as state funds allocated by average daily membership (ADM) follow the children when they leave traditional public schools for charter schools. Traditional public schools take all students in the attendance zone. Charter schools have the option to reject students based on prescribed criteria like behavioral difficulties or to grant acceptance to siblings of currently enrolled students. While this flexibility for charter schools is true in reality, statute does not afford charter schools this flexibility in actuality.

As a Black woman in America, I acknowledge my subjectivity to promote socially just schools where disadvantaged Black students are provided equal opportunities to excel with caring and invested high quality professionals. Additionally, when students are not able to perform in traditional public school settings, which is the case for a vast majority of America's Black students, options like charter schools may be a setting to level the playing field for all. Moreover, I grew up in a working class home with a strong value on education. We didn't have much money; however, my parents instilled the belief that education buys freedom.

Having grown up with parents, grandparents, and extended family and friends who attended segregated schools, I felt the great sense of pride in the schools they

attended. Moreover, there is a great sense of responsibility instilled in me to protect the rights that were fought for and that people died for, the right to attend integrated schools. As a product of public schools myself, I received a great public education, and I haven't been able to fully grasp the need for charter schools but have perceived them as a threat to public education as we have known it.

Much to my surprise, however, after conducting two pilot studies in a small, high-poverty urban charter high school, with 98% Black and Hispanic students, I became interested in exploring how a certain type of charter school might be making a difference in the lives of Black students. Specifically, a charter school like the one examined in the prior two pilot studies, built upon a foundation of instilling a sense of Black pride, positive self-esteem, social responsibility, and accountability was a particularly interesting setting. This particular charter school had 100% graduation rate and 0% dropout rate. These results with such an at-risk population are remarkable. Yet, the students and their teachers reported the most significant factor creating these results was relationships. Each student at the school believed an adult cared about them and was invested in their education. There was a mindset by teachers, we won't let you [students] fail and that mindset translated into college for all.

The discovery of the two pilot study charter school's success caused me to think about what it would look like for middle school student to be fully engaged and invested in school. Thus, I discovered characteristics of a school setting that addressed my subjectivity, as educators instill a sense of pride in students about their Black heritage while also helping Black students to excel academically. Students achieving in any

setting is what is most important to me, so I have thoroughly enjoyed learning more about charter schools where disadvantaged Black students are excelling. Furthermore, charter school's potential impact on the very students threatened to be left behind in a traditional public school system encourages me to gain a deeper understanding of their strategies and outcomes.

While I acknowledge that this revelation is in stark contradiction to my earlier predispositions, I relinquish my narrow mindedness and have opened myself up to see a new paradigm of reflexivity through the research process. I chose to focus on this research to create a dialogue about the experiences of students whose perspectives have been overlooked and who have not had an opportunity to fully communicate how traditional public schools are failing them and how one small, urban charter school is impacting their educational experiences.

Disadvantaged Black middle school students' voices have not been fully heard. The goal of this research is to create an awareness of their stories, their perspectives, and their needs while I proudly proclaim that their stories are intertwined with mine as a Black woman, the mother of a Black son, and a Black educator who seeks to illuminate and influence students' lives through my mission to educate and to equip all students regardless of class, socioeconomic status, or race have a better outlook for their future. While Aristotle states, "Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom," I contend that knowing others in connection with yourself is the beginning and the continuation of wisdom and enlightenment (Pillow, 2003). It is through that presupposition and desire

for understanding that the research questions, limitations, and delimitations are introduced in the next section of the research study.

Research Questions

Glesne (2011) states that research questions help focus the study. In essence, the research questions helped the researcher laser in to the focus and purpose of the research study. In order to ground this research study, the following research questions guided the inquiry:

1. What factors positively and negatively influence the educational experiences of the disadvantaged Black middle school students in this case study?
2. What instructional, organizational, social, or cultural attributes motivate the disadvantaged Black middle school student participants to invest in their academic future when enrolled in their current charter school?

Limitations

The research study has the following limitations:

1. The student participants in this study are under the age of 18. Therefore, the students may or may not be able to verbalize their educational experiences as well as older students or adults. Moreover, parent permission was required for student participation so student participation may have been aligned to the fact that parents signed permission for them to participate and may not have been derived from their own genuine interest.
2. The premise of this study was that disadvantaged Black middle school students made a choice to leave a traditional public school for the charter

school setting. As a result, there may be non-academic reasons students chose to leave the traditional public school setting.

3. Academic achievement for the student participants in this study was based on individual academic achievement as discussed previously in the definition of terms section of this chapter, rather than solely based on school accountability results or EOGs. An attempt was made to include both individual student academic achievement and whole school accountability results of which the participants were a part. Moreover, non-quantifiable measures for academic achievement were included based on self-report and the voices of the participants.
4. The original participant recruitment plan for this research study was based on free and reduced lunch status. However, the free and reduced lunch status was unavailable to the researcher due to confidentiality guidelines by the federal Food and Nutrition Services (FNS). Nonetheless, I revised the criterion used for low-income, Black students to include students considered disadvantaged by the researcher because they attend a high poverty, disadvantaged school. Therefore, the research study is limited to disadvantaged Black middle school students.
5. The research participants in this study were recruited based on a participant pool established by the principal. Because the participant pool was selected in this way, there may be bias on the part of the principal that might have influenced the research data collected. Had the participant pool been selected

with a more random means, the potential principal bias would have been eliminated.

Due to time constraints of the researcher, this study was limited to one small, urban charter school in North Carolina. Therefore, meaning making was limited to better understanding the educational experiences of disadvantaged Black middle school students from one high-poverty, charter middle school in North Carolina. With more time and funding, this study could be replicated in other schools, regions, states, and across the nation with other student populations. Additionally, this study could be further defined to focus on the perspectives of disadvantaged students controlled for gender perspectives.

Delimitations

The delimitations employed by the researcher in this study were controlled for disadvantaged Black middle school students attending a small charter school in a large, urban city in North Carolina. In order to gain the students' perceptions of the traditional public schools they previously attended and the impact of the charter school on their academic achievement and educational experiences, I selected disadvantaged Black middle school male and female students who previously attended traditional public schools. Additionally, to triangulate the data the students' parents and teachers were also interviewed. The selection of the participant population allowed the researcher to explore the perceptions of disadvantaged Black middle school students who previously had negative educational experiences in traditional public schools but are now successful in the charter school setting they chose.

Assumptions

This study included the following assumptions: (a) The data collected revealed codes, categories, themes, commonalities, and differences in perceptions about the educational experiences of the student participants; (b) The interpretation of the data accurately reflected perceptions of disadvantaged Black, middle school student participants about their charter school and traditional public school experiences; and (c) Observations, a student focus group, student, teacher survey, and parent interviews along with a thorough records review revealed any discontinuity in the data. My hope was that the participants shared valuable insights into their understandings of what works in school for them and that this information adds to the growing body of research on charter schools. Additionally, this insight would be beneficial to traditional public schools as educators seek new and different ways to decrease the achievement gap between White and Black students.

Chapter I introduced the research study by providing the background of the study, the problem statement, purpose, and significance of the study. Chapter I also defined several key terms and positionality of the researcher. Finally, the research questions were introduced, the limitations and delimitations impacting the study were reviewed, and the assumptions of the study were revealed. Chapter II provides a review of the literature and history of charter schools in the U.S. and specifically charter schools in North Carolina. It also provides the conceptual framework for the study that will be used to undergird data collection, analysis, and interpretations.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter II provides a rich literature review of the historical background of charter schools and the history of charter schools in North Carolina. This case study focused on one small, urban charter middle school in North Carolina. Therefore, it was particularly important to focus on the North Carolina charter school movement. Chapter II also compares and contrasts charter schools with traditional public schools. Moreover, critical race theory (CRT) is introduced as the lens by which the entire study is viewed and an underlying focus throughout. Finally, the chapter concludes with the conceptual framework guiding the study including the instructional, organizational, social, and cultural attributes of charter schools.

The Historical Background of Charter Schools

Charter schools began in Minnesota in 1991 and quickly grew to have a presence in 40 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia by 2009 (Scott & Villavicencio, 2009, p. 227). Subsequently, “The number of charter schools in the United States increased from 1,500 in 1999–2000 to 4,400 in 2007–08” (Aud et al., 2010, p. 98) while “From 1999–2000 to 2007–08, the number of students enrolled in charter schools in the United States more than tripled, increasing from 340,000 to 1.3 million students” (Aud et

al., 2010, p. 98). With this rapid growth came questions about the performance of charter schools and the need for more research about their influence on academic achievement.

In the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) which ended legal segregation, attitudes about the need for parental choice have expanded to include options for parents to avoid sending their children to inferior and low performing schools. School choice options vary greatly in the U. S. due to the differences in state and federal requirements (Berends, Goldring, Stein, & Cravens, 2010). Moreover, Frankenberg (2011) states,

In the years immediately following the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, school choice was used by school districts both as a means to further integration and as a way to limit the extent of desegregation that occurred. Magnet schools and controlled choice became popular ways for school districts to comply with court desegregation orders in the late 1960s and 1970s as the specter of ‘forced busing’ made mandatory reassignment plans less popular. (p. 101)

Choice plans were originally designed to integrate schools and maintain racial balance and prevent racial isolation. They were also supposed to create options for parents to ensure their children had opportunity to achieve academically. Despite these goals, choice plans have fallen short and have resulted in a return to segregated schools. Moreover, with schools having more students who look alike, the challenges of educating all and closing the achievement gap are still fundamental objectives that need to be closely explored. The outcomes of charter schools and their impact on student achievement lack validity due to inadequate and often contradictory research measuring their effectiveness with student achievement (Berends et al., 2010; Betts & Atkinson,

2012; Frankenberg, 2011; Furgeson et al., 2011; Gulosino & d'Entremont, 2011; Scott & Villavicencio, 2009; Zimmer & Buddin, 2006).

Concerns exist over the ability of higher achieving students to leave failing schools behind while also leaving the most vulnerable students in our society with less qualified teachers, inadequate resources, and fewer opportunities for educational achievement. Some opponents of charter schools have expressed concern that charter schools would become a vehicle for White students to escape diverse schools. However, the trend in many states is that Black students and students from disadvantaged families are overrepresented in charter schools due to the increased number of charter schools in larger urban areas (WestEd, 2006). Nevertheless, many families, White and Black, are choosing to enroll their children in charter schools due to the racial composition of the student body (Bell, 2009; Bifulco, Ladd, & Ross, 2009; Scott & Villavicencio, 2009). While concerns existed about White students leaving schools filled with Black students and other minorities, Black students and their parents have also been opting for schools where the students look more like them rather than the diverse schools that proponents of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) had in mind.

The debate about the performance of charter schools was ignited in 2004 when the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) issued a report that found charter schools underperformed in relation to traditional public schools (Nelson et al., 2004; Scott & Villavicencio, 2009). There is much discussion about how to best measure charter school performance, but researchers agree that charter school results are mixed (Betts et al.,

2006; Frankenberg, 2011; Nelson et al., 2004; Scott & Villavicencio, 2009; Zimmer & Buddin, 2006).

Charter school advocates have maintained that charter schools would increase student achievement for all students and increase accountability of both charter and traditional public schools with the competition created by choice options for parents (Betts et al., 2006; Stambach & Becker, 2006). The AFT's report compared the performance of charter schools and some religious schools with that of traditional public and private school performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The report found that charter schools and some religious schools underperformed in reading and math when compared with traditional public schools. Moreover,

The report also found that charter school students were less poor than public school students, even though charter schools enrolled a greater proportion of central city and minority children. The authors concluded that charter schools were not helping to reduce the racial achievement gap, and were also falling short of claims of improved student achievement. (Scott & Villavicencio, 2009, p. 229)

Consequently, Frankenberg (2011) cites, "Charter schools often are places of substantial racial isolation and, in fact, can contribute to pockets of white isolation as well as schools that are overwhelmingly students of color" (p. 102). These results indicate that school choice options may have undesirable effects on school environments and the very students' choice options were intended to protect.

It is particularly disconcerting that we do not have solid evidence about the outcomes of charter schools on student achievement. Conversely, "In fact, charter

schools may actually have a negative impact on achievement for minority students in some cases” (Zimmer & Buddin, 2006, p. 324) as more advantaged students opt out of traditional public schools when the demographics are concentrations of disadvantaged Black students (Bifulco et al., 2009). The opting out of more advantaged students further casts credence to the concerns about charter schools increasing race stratification and resegregation (Bell, 2009; Brunner, Imazeki, & Ross, 2010; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2004; Koedel, Betts, Rice, & Zau, 2009; Smrekar, 2009). In North Carolina these concerns have played out in several large urban school districts with government influence and education rulings by the courts. The next section addresses the history of charter schools in North Carolina.

The History of Charter Schools in North Carolina

Charter schools in North Carolina began in 1994 with the creation of the North Carolina charter school bill. With a Republican majority in the House of Representatives and gains in the Senate, a strong conservative agenda was promoted including education reforms that paved the way for charter schools in North Carolina to be realized. In 1996, a bipartisan charter school bill known as the Charter School Act was passed with a 100-school charter school cap (Stoops, 2010). The legislation was designed to:

- (1) Improve student learning; (2) Increase learning opportunities for all students, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for student who are identified as at risk of academic failure or academically gifted; (3) Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods; (4) Create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunities to be responsible for the learning at the school site; (5) Provide parents and students with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system; and (6) Hold the schools established under this Part accountable for meeting measurable student achievement results, and provide the schools with

a method to change from rule-based to performance-based accountability systems. (North Carolina Public Schools, State Board of Education, & Department of Public Instruction, 2014, p. 3)

These goals then became the criteria for charter school applications to be reviewed for approval by the State Board of Education, the approval board for charter schools in North Carolina.

North Carolina subsequently lifted the cap on charter schools with the passage of Senate Bill 8 (North Carolina General Assembly, 2011). The elimination of the cap on charter schools is a result of the federal requirements of President Barack Obama's Race to the Top (RttT) grant (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Currently, Public Schools of North Carolina (2014) reports, "127 charter schools, located in 57 school districts, are currently open and serving approximately 62,040 students in North Carolina" (p. 7). Comparatively, North Carolina Public Schools served approximately 1,434,436 students in 2011-2012 (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015). Additionally, the legislature created the North Carolina Charter Schools Advisory Board made up of people that support charter schools and their expansion. The lifting of the cap on charter schools has created options for parents, competition for traditional public schools, and school districts have been forced to manage the loss of financial resources and student enrollment (Bifulco, 2010; Furgeson et al., 2011).

The creation and expansion of charter schools in North Carolina have created options for parents. The North Carolina Office of Charter Schools states, "Charter schools provide parents a choice in the education of their children—and it is a public choice. . . . The only requirement to get into a charter school is the availability at the

school in the requested grade” (Public Schools of North Carolina et al., 2014b, paras. 1, 4). However, the charter school movement has also established more scrutiny on race and its impact on schooling in North Carolina. Stoops (2010) reports, “In 2002, the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research (NCCPPR) published a report that suggested that charter schools perpetuated racial segregation. In 2007, the NCCPPR published a follow-up report that came to the same conclusion” (para. 27). Additionally, Ladd, Clotfelter, and Holbein (2015) report that initially Black students were overrepresented in charter schools, but now White students are “significantly overrepresented” (p. 7). Their research combined the percentage of Black and Hispanic students attending charter schools and found that

charter schools served a disproportionately small number of minority students; black and Hispanic students accounted for 31.8 percent of the charter school students in this grade range, which was well below their 39.2 percent share of traditional public school students. (p. 7)

Moreover, confounding the race issue are education rulings in North Carolina that have also impacted the educational landscape with regards to charter schools, one option for those seeking school choice.

North Carolina has a history of controversial education rulings in large urban school districts resulting in the establishment of multi and varied school choice options for students and their parents. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Forsyth County Schools, and most recently Wake County Schools have all been involved in lengthy legal battles over school choice options for students and parents. These legal battles were largely over the school district’s policies affecting busing and racial segregation resulting in the

neighborhood schools concept. Critics warned that the neighborhood concept would likely result in “resegregation” (Clotfelter et al., 2004, p. 347) of schools and inequitable schools with White and Black parents exercising their right to chose the best school for their children based on their own specified criteria (Bell, 2009; Furgeson et al., 2011).

The evidence of this warning is happening all across the state in larger districts exercising the neighborhood school concept or choice plans resulting in increasing charter school enrollment. Additionally, Gulosino and d’Entremont (2011) note that “studies of racial/ethnic sorting in schools have raised concerns among policymakers that increased school choice may prompt families, especially white families, to move to more segregated schools” (p. 4). While the demographics of charter schools are supposed to reflect the demographics of the school district in which they are located, not all charter schools do, just as all traditional public schools do not reflect the demographics of the school district at large. Unfortunately, there is no state educational agency that monitors demographics to ensure this happens and Peter Drucker states, “what gets monitored gets done.”

The creation and expansion of charter schools coinciding with the neighborhood concept in larger North Carolina school districts has created a perfect storm with regard to racial segregation in schools. The question about White parents using charter schools to prevent their children from attending school with disadvantaged minority children is not as profound a question when looking at the current statistics on charter school enrollment. According to the North Carolina Annual Charter Schools Report (2014), charter school enrollment has increased in North Carolina steadily since 1997–1998 with

charter schools including approximately three percent of North Carolina's public school students. Moreover, charter school demographics as measured by the 2012–2013 Grade, Race, Sex Report indicate no statistical difference between charter school demographics and those of public schools (Public Schools of North Carolina, State Board of Education, & Department of Public Instruction, 2014).

Research about parents' ability to make educated choices regarding schooling indicates that White and Black parents are indeed making informed choices to send their children to alternative schools with the ultimate decision resting with which school would provide the best educational opportunities for their children (Bomotti, 1996).

Conversely, Frankenberg (2011) posits that parents' ability to fully understand their options and to exercise them varies and subsequently adds, "School choice options that don't explicitly have civil rights provisions may exacerbate existing segregation and inequality" (p. 101). Ironically, research shows that many North Carolina minority parents are less concerned about racial diversity in their children's schools, and are more concerned about the quality of the education their children receive. Stoops (2010) elaborates,

According to a recent survey of African American parents in North Carolina, 100 percent of the respondents accepted the lack of diversity in their schools, and 81 percent agreed that the lack of diversity was not significant as long as their children received a quality education. The survey indicates that some African American parents even prefer to send their children to a predominantly black charter school. (para. 30)

Despite concerns over White flight and the abandonment of disadvantaged Black children in failing schools, research suggests that disadvantaged Black parents are also exercising

their right to choose different school options for their children and these choices may be having significant effects on their children's educational achievement (Ball, 2015; Bifulco et al., 2009; Brunner et al., 2010; CBS News, 2010; Cobb & Glass, 2009; Gulosino & d'Entremont, 2011; Hoxby & Murarka, 2008; Ladd et al., 2015; Seaton, 2015; WestEd, 2006). Conversely, the Black flight movement that Betts et al. (2006) acknowledge reflects, "once students begin to 'vote with their feet,' school principals will want to compete for the best students and therefore have incentives to provide the best possible education to the student 'consumer'" (p. iii). Therefore, the educational choices of students are being analyzed not only in terms of what choice they and their parents are making regarding school selection, but how that choice impacts parents' desire to seek charter schools for their disadvantaged Black students as opposed to traditional public schools. Moreover, how competition between schools translates into incentives to create the best opportunities and educational experiences for students who need it most needs to be analyzed.

The researcher is aware of the neoliberalism movement to compete with traditional public schools because schooling and funding is big business. Nevertheless, this case study research is not based upon the premise that competition exists for dollars in the case of the research study participants' school. Certainly the dollars follow the students as explained by the North Carolina Office of Charter Schools, "Public tax dollars are the primary funding source for charter schools. Local, state, and federal dollars follow the child to a charter school" (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014b, para. 1). However, Success Academy is an underfunded high poverty school without the support

and backing of a large private entity supporting the school for a quick fix turnaround (Baltodano, 2012). The competition referred to by the researcher in this research study is competition based upon the need for all schools to educate students to the best of their abilities or face the consequences. These consequences now include parents having other choices for educational delivery other than traditional public schools, charter schools.

In sum, a closer examination of charter schools and their instructional strategies for academic achievement from the perspective of disadvantaged Black middle school students is needed in order to determine their merit and the potential impact on the North Carolina students they serve, especially those with the greatest need. This research examines a small group of disadvantaged Black middle school students who made the choice to vacate their traditional public schools for a different choice, a small urban charter middle school in North Carolina. The next section compares and contrasts charter schools with traditional public schools to reveal similarities and differences in the two educational settings.

Charter Schools versus Traditional Public Schools

Charter schools are public schools and receive state funds, yet they do not have the same restrictions as traditional public schools (Frankenberg, 2011; Hoxby & Murarka, 2008; WestEd, 2006). Furthermore,

Nelson Smith, president of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, puts it this way: ‘Charter schools are giving administrators the freedom to innovate, teachers the ability to be creative, parents the chance to be involved, and students the opportunity to learn—creating a partnership that leads to improved student achievement.’ (WestEd, 2006, p. 12)

Charter school founders typically apply for their charter from the state board of education or local boards of education on the grounds that they will provide a different educational opportunity for students than traditional public schools can offer. Founders also purport their mission to be innovative, and to offer greater flexibility and choice to parents and students seeking alternatives to the traditional public education setting. Charter school administrators and governing boards are also afforded great latitude and freedom with regards to their size and curriculum (WestEd, 2006; Zimmer et al., 2009).

The flexibility in governance of charter schools create more autonomy with decision-making and charter school administrators have less formally identified means of scrutinizing students for admission than private schools (Zimmer & Buddin, 2006).

Additionally, WestEd (2006) states,

Under these conditions of increased autonomy, school communities can mobilize to work together in new ways to achieve success. Compared to regular public schools, they often have greater control of their budgets, greater discretion over hiring and staffing decisions, and greater opportunity to create innovative programs. (p. 2)

Charter schools advertise open admission but frequently use a lottery system to determine enrollment (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011). However, they are prohibited from violating “civil rights guidelines” (Scott & Villavicencio, 2009, p. 236) when creating their student selection criteria. This means charter schools may not discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability, sex, or age according to Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Furthermore, “Since charter schools are public schools, they must provide special education and related

services to all eligible students” (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014b, para. 3). This control over student enrollment gives charter schools a definitive advantage over traditional public schools as traditional public schools enroll all students that live in their attendance zones (Lawyers.com, 2011; Zimmer & Buddin, 2006).

The charter school governing board’s ability to choose the student body is linked to both a desire to produce high student achievement but is also tied to the charter school’s founding mission. Some charter schools are created for the purpose of serving a specific student population and the governing boards cater the student body makeup to support that end. The ability of charter school boards to tailor their enrollment based on the location of the charter school may provide an advantage as a result of the

‘literal positioning’—here charter schools are located relative to particular educational and demographic characteristics—of schools vis-a-vis their surrounding neighborhoods as a market-based strategy to serve different students across often segregated urban landscapes. (Gulosino & d’Entremont, 2011, p. 3)

The location of charter schools creates competition for traditional public schools while the governing boards and educators explore instructional strategies and methods they deem suitable to meet the needs of their less diverse student populations.

Another way charter schools are different from traditional public schools are in their administrators’ and governing boards’ ability to recruit and retain their teaching staff. Charter school founders have greater flexibility with hiring personnel (Betts & Atkinson, 2012; Lack, 2009; WestEd, 2006). Consequently, there is also flexibility in charter schoolteacher compensation and representation of teachers through teacher unions varies. Moreover, charter school contracts may require conditions that traditional public

school boards could not render including expectations with regards to longer working hours, tutoring requirements, and availability to students as exemplified by charter schools that are more restrictive with regards to expectations for teachers to work long hours tutoring students after school, on Saturdays, and to provide additional support or services for students beyond the regular school day (Lack, 2009; WestEd, 2006).

Charter schools and traditional public schools are similar and different in some ways that will be examined. There are similarities and differences with regards to the key attributes that charter school advocates tout as catalysts for their success. As part of the conceptual framework for how this research study was conducted and the data analyzed includes the instructional, organizational, social, and cultural attributes of successful schools. The conceptual framework will be outlined in the next section.

Conceptual Framework

Schools are social institutions. Educators teach and model appropriate socialization skills for students as they grow and develop. Middle schools are particularly social institutions as they are a microcosm of society within brick and mortar walls where ideally students learn how to cooperate, collaborate, and get along with one another in a safe and nurturing environment where they feel safe to take risks and to identify and foster their interests. Moreover, developmentally, students in their middle school years are learning who they are, forming their identity, and establishing their place in the school community. Therefore, the role of schools as social institutions will be used as one element of the conceptual framework for this study (see Figure 1).

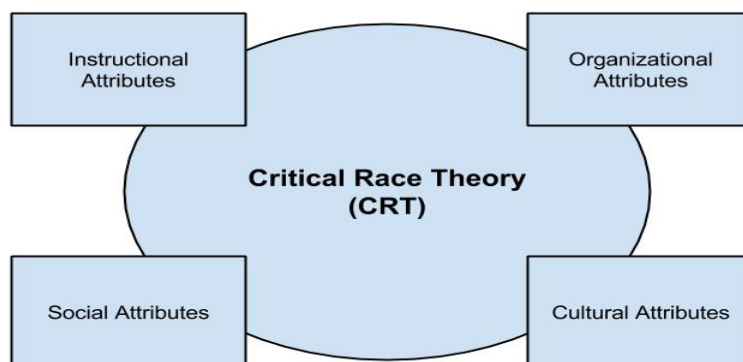


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework employed for this research study. The researcher created the conceptual framework developed and used to anchor this research study after doing much research on best practices of schools. With the outlook that successful schools have certain characteristics, I brainstormed a list of all of the components I could think of that schools with positive outcomes do to ensure their students are successful. From that exhaustive list I narrowed it down into categories and subcategories. These categories and subcategories represented the overarching characteristics of successful schools. The subcategories were then merged into what was deemed four attributes of successful schools that would comprise the conceptual framework for this research study. The conceptual framework was in no way created to be a restrictive means of approaching the research, the data collection, or analysis. It was an attempt by the researcher to create a scaffold by which the meaning co-constructed by the researcher and the research participants might be examined.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the center lens through which the entire study is focused. The other scaffolds represent the various attributes used to frame the data

collection, analysis, and interpretations based upon the characteristics of successful schools.

Race still plays a role in the distribution of wealth and power in this country. Thus, an underlying supposition of this study was the impact race has on educational access and attainment of disadvantaged Black students. The influence of race undergirded the conceptual framework of this study, as did the instructional influence of schools as organizations. Furthermore, social and cultural influences also impacted the educational experiences of the student participants. It was important to examine all of these elements; instructional attributes, critical race theory (CRT), schools as organizations, as well as social and cultural influences as frameworks to scaffold and examine student participant perceptions, actions, and ultimately how these behaviors influenced student achievement within the charter school that is a part of this case study, Success Academy. The next subsection of this study explores critical race theory and its role in illuminating the data collection and analysis processes within this case study.

Critical Race Theory

Race is very much a part of the history of education in this country. Consequently, the foundation of critical race theory (CRT) is “that racism is normal, not aberrant, in American Society” (Delgado, 2013, p. 40). Education scholars explore CRT and the way race influences social development and operation within schools (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Freeman, 2011; Gillborn, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Parker, 1998). CRT will be utilized as a lens through which the research study was designed and a lens through which the charter school and the student participants were examined throughout

this research study. Parker (1998) posits “. . . a purpose of critical race theory is to question social constructions and assumptions of race . . .” (p. 44). Moreover, Parker (1998) goes on to say,

A major point of CRT is to place race at the center of analysis with respect to how many White European Americans and institutions in U.S. society assume normative standards of whiteness, which in turn ignores or subjugates African-Americans, American Indians, Chicanos-Chicanas, Chinese Americans, and other marginalized racial groups. (p. 45)

Therefore, the existence of race and its influence on the educational experiences students have in school was an important consideration when communicating the story about how the student participants transitioned from traditional public schools to a small, urban charter school. The experiences of these students was characterized by looking at “how, despite the progress of civil rights laws and good intentions to eradicate racism, it is still an endemic part of life in the US. CRT maintains that racism has been ingrained through historical consciousness and events . . .” (Parker, 1998, p. 45).

Critical race theory was utilized as a framework to tell the stories of “racially marginalized students on predominantly white campuses. These narratives comprise an integral part of historical and current testimonies and findings of fact in legal and political policy battles surrounding race in higher education” (Parker, 1998, p. 49). Moreover, Delgado (1989) asserts, “one can acquire the ability to see the world through others eyes” (p. 2439), when listening to the stories and accounts of students based on their race and how it impacted their experiences while attending educational institutions. While Parker’s (1998) research illuminated the experiences of CRT and students in institutions

of higher education, CRT was a valuable tool by which to consider perceptions about the educational choices and accordingly the educational experiences of the student experiences. Thus, CRT as the lens through which the educational experiences of the disadvantaged Black middle school student participants was viewed and was beneficial to support this research study.

The influence of race in essence created the need for charter schools as a vehicle for school choice options for parents dissatisfied with schools, enrollment policies, busing, and neighborhood schools after integration (Brunner et al., 2010; Clotfelter et al., 2004; Smrekar, 2009). Moreover, Dixson and Rousseau (2005) state,

Yet, according to Ladson-Billings and Tate, race remained at that time under-theorized as a topic of scholarly inquiry in education. As a means to begin to address this conceptual void, they proposed that critical race theory (CRT), a framework developed by legal scholars, could be employed to examine the role of race and racism in education. (p. 8)

Because race is such a part of American society and the educational system, it was vitally important to consider race when examining the voices and stories of the student participants who made the choice to attend charter schools as opposed to traditional public schools.

Critical race theory is an entrenched structural framework for synthesizing the attitudes and prevailing structures within an organization. The social and organizational features of schools are influenced by race and CRT was used to critically analyze the data collected. Disadvantaged Black middle school students are the focus of this study and without utilizing the lens of CRT the paradigm of the research participants' perceptions

would be limited. CRT adds an additional means by which to frame and understand the lived experiences of the research participants. As such, applying CRT adds additional depth that might not be revealed without this reflection for analysis. Moreover, to acknowledge the influence of CRT on disadvantaged Black middle school students provided additional insights into their social and educational reality. Next, components of the conceptual framework are revealed.

Components of the Conceptual Framework

The next subsections of the research study address the components of the conceptual framework used to frame the research study. This conceptual framework (see Figure 1) is multifaceted to allow for the multi and varied perceptions that are possible when exploring the student participants' thoughts on their educational experiences. The components of the conceptual framework used to guide and examine the research were selected based on the key components and characteristics of successful schools discussed earlier in this chapter.

Successful schools share several key components that make them successful in increasing student achievement and creating environments where students learn and are successful. Therefore, to create a conceptual framework that would provide the basis for guiding, informing, and evaluating the data for this research required a conceptual framework composed of the best elements of successful schools. These characteristics were observed to be present in most research of effective schools expressed in various ways including a focus on— high quality teaching and learning, principal, faculty and student leadership, accountability, schools having a clear vision and mission, schools free

of bullying, a focus on instructional improvement, culture and climate that promote a healthy and inclusive experience for students and staff, maintaining high expectations for student achievement, supportive and nurturing relationships, a safe and orderly learning environment, and strong parent and community involvement (Chard, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Education.com, 2013; Marzano, 2003; Ratner & Neill, 2010; T. Wagner, 2008; Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004).

The recurring strategies and characteristics of effective schools were then organized into four main categories for the purposes of narrowing the conceptual framework into a set of criteria that could mutually coexist to approach and evaluate the data through the CRT lens. None of the characteristics of effective schools are exclusive. They are interchangeable and mutually dependent within the conceptual framework used to scaffold the research study through the CRT lens. However, it was helpful to group the major subcategories into the four major categories as part of the conceptual framework for a more precise focus.

The conceptual framework provided the means to look at the multifaceted complexity of schools and their dynamic role in equipping students for life in the 21st century. While this role is an ideal, it is one worth striving for. One key element of the role of schools included the instructional attributes of charter schools.

Instructional Attributes of Schools

The research on charter schools is inconclusive at best with regards to the impact on disadvantaged Black middle school student academic achievement. However, there are studies that indicate effective instructional attributes that build academic success for

students. Because charter school creators apply for their charter with a specific mission, the mission and vision of charter school administrators and supporters is a key element of success. A focus on specific shared educational beliefs and pedagogical decisions for improving teaching and learning has been shown to be effective for some students attending charter schools (Bifulco, 2010; Booker, Sass, Gill, & Zimmer, 2011; Dobbie & Fyer, 2011; Hoxby & Murarka, 2008; Lack, 2009; WestEd, 2006; Zimmer & Buddin, 2006). Furthermore, Berends et al. (2010) state,

... in schools where teachers reported that they had high expectations for achievement, believed it is important for all students to do well, and emphasized challenging work and completing assignments, students experienced higher gains than those in schools where the focus on academic achievement was less. (p. 26)

Other researchers tout innovative standards based education in charter schools as a means to influence educational equity for disadvantaged Black students (Easley, 2011). All of these attributes—teacher expectations, sound instructional focus, and innovative standards—are key elements influencing academic achievement.

Principal to school's instructional elements are the curriculum taught and the structure within the school with regards to grading and expectations for academic achievement. The ability of charter school innovators to generate support for the mission is as powerful in motivating teachers and community stakeholders as in traditional public schools. In general, Hoxby and Murarka (2008) posit,

Every charter school describes itself in a carefully crafted mission statement that sets out its vision, educational philosophy, and focus. Based on these statements, we can categorize the schools roughly into five groups: those that have a child-centered or progressive educational philosophy and typically seek to develop

students' love of learning, respect for others, and creativity (29 percent of students); those with a general or traditional educational mission and a focus on students' core skills (28 percent of students); those with a rigorous academic emphasis, which have mission statements that focus almost exclusively on academic goals such as excelling in school and going to college (25 percent of students); those that target a particular population of students, such as low-income students, special needs students, likely dropouts, male students, and female students (11 percent of students); and those in which a certain aspect of the curriculum, such as science or the arts, is paramount (7 percent of students); (p. 60)

The importance of having a clearly defined mission guiding instructional decisions and practices for charter schools is cited in several studies as a vital element to the overall success of the charter school and student achievement (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Hoxby & Murarka, 2008; Reardon, 2009; WestEd, 2006).

Other instructional factors also influence student performance. Charter schools tend to be smaller, supporting the belief that charter schools provide a more personalized educational experience (Allen & Consoletti, 2010; Banks, Bodkin, & Heissel, 2011). Moreover, charter school students generally attend school longer than traditional public school students (Allen & Consoletti, 2010; Tuttle, Teh, Nichols-Barrer, Gill, & Gleason, 2010) and they tend to wear uniforms (Gleason et al., 2010), with high poverty charter school students more likely to wear uniforms than other charter school students (Banks et al., 2011). Furthermore, charter school students tend to meet with their teachers more often receiving more individualized attention than traditional public schools (Allen & Consoletti, 2010), which are also attributed to have a positive influence on student achievement and preventing students from “falling through the cracks” (Allen & Consoletti, 2010; Hoxby & Murarka, 2008, p. 61; Lack, 2009).

The instructional attributes referenced—having a focused mission, sound instructional practices, and maintaining high expectations for students—are best practices that all schools could employ to improve academic achievement. Educators focused on student achievement gains with a plan in place to accomplish their goals, focused decision making, and monitoring of curriculum and instruction based on those goals are likely to have similar gains in academic achievement. Moreover, Osler (2010) wrote about the importance of student perspectives in the dialogue about school improvement and called for more democratic involvement of students and teachers in the process of decision making for schools. Osler (2010) expounds,

Most importantly, I am arguing that quality education can in fact only be realized when young people's perspectives are built into these processes and when structures are put in place so that not only are young people listened to, but there is also scope for building and acting on their ideas and needs. (p. 11)

These strategies are not unique to charter schools but could be applied to all schools with a goal of improving student achievement. Schools as organizations are discussed in the next subsection.

Schools as Organizations

Schools are social institutions and as such have organizational policies and practices that enable them to function. Berends et al. (2010) posit that all schools have organizational structures, traditions, rituals, and cultural norms that define “legitimate schooling” (p. 308) and expound,

. . . that choice schools ‘operate in a very different institutional setting distinguished by the basic features of markets—decentralization, competition, and

choice—and their organizations should be expected to bear a very different stamp as a result. They should tend to possess the autonomy, clarity of mission, strong leadership, teacher professionalism, and team cooperation that public schools want but except under very fortunate circumstances are unlikely to have.’ (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 67)

Schools as organizations were an important element to consider when defining the conceptual framework of this study. Disadvantaged Black middle school students in this study made a choice to change the educational organization they were attending by deciding to attend a charter school instead of a traditional public school. This decision impacted the educational experiences of students because schools as organizations encompass many different components of the school as a whole, and thereby the experiences of the students who attend these organizations. Particularly for student participants who left their traditional public schools for a charter school experience, it was important to consider the organizational elements of the school that may have influenced the decision making process and the outcomes of that decision in their day to day interactions within the school.

Paramount to the organizational structure of schools include—the authority of administrators and teachers, the ability of students to have a voice, and the governing or decision making body within the school. When identifying the organizational elements of schools, one must consider numerous components. Moreover, Zamudio, Russell, Rios, and Bridgeman (2011) state, “What classes are available, which teachers are assigned to teach which classes, and which classes students are placed in are all part of school organizational decisions” (p. 105). Who makes these decisions is also an important part of the organization of schools. Therefore, the organization of schools impacts students’

“opportunity-to-learn” (Lee, 2002, p. 9). The opportunities available to students are enhanced or limited by the organization of schools and the structures that permeate the school and the staff within it who make learning available for students.

Examining schools as organizations and the teaching and learning that occurs in schools is a part of Kinsler and Gamble’s (2001) work as they extensively synthesize the history of school reform in this country and posit,

At the time the public schools were constituted in their current form, mechanistic and behavioral views were popular and became the bases for the schools’ structures and culture. The behavioral view portrayed the child as passive and learning as a passive process of linking actions and information together, based upon their frequent association in time or the receipt of rewards. (p. 17)

Thus, instructional content delivery and beliefs about teaching and learning are important elements of any school as an organization. Moreover, Chubb and Moe (1990) assert that schools are not free to be whatever they want. “They do not choose their goals, leadership, personnel, and practices with complete freedom. Parents, students, and external authorities constrain their choices and even impose organizational decisions on them” (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 141). These choices and elements are extremely important given state and federal accountability requirements measured by Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs), previously discussed in Chapter I.

While accountability is a part of the organization of schools, one might think students do not make decisions regarding their educational delivery setting based on these criteria. However, a school’s ability to demonstrate that they generate positive results or outcomes is a component of the organization that cannot be overlooked, especially in the

age of increased competition and school choice options. Kinsler and Gamble (2001) cite the work of Kirst (1990) and Seyfarth (1999) and state,

Accountability refers to the relationship between an individual who dispenses a service and the recipient or patron of that service. The patron has certain expectations concerning the work, e.g., that it will be done in an ethical, informed, responsive, and responsible manner to achieve certain outcomes, and has the power to reward, punish, or replace the provider if these expectations are not met . . . for example, in education, teachers are expected to choose materials and methods that enable children to learn new content. They are expected to administer tests and other forms of assessment to gauge students' progress and to give parents timely and accurate feedback on their children's performance. (p. 21)

Consequently, today's patrons or consumers of the services that schools provide have options that enable them to make complex choices about who delivers the service sought. Teaching and learning is a service that students and parents alike have the capability to evaluate and to assess prior to selecting the deliverer of that service. Therefore, students and parents may evaluate the services offered in order to make the best possible choice regarding their educational provider. The competition that exists as a result of these options and the illumination of school service delivery created by the focus on accountability has created options that were not available to students years ago. Now this competition fosters a very important part of educational opportunity and may influence the choices of disadvantaged Black students when schools meet or fail to meet the expectations for accountability and educational outcomes.

A focus on the school community and the cultural implications within the school environment was a concentration of this study. The impact schools as organizations have on the social development of students create a focus on the behaviors, attitudes, and the

unique perspectives of disadvantaged Black middle school students. This focus undergirded the exploration of the organizational and social setting of Success Academy, the small, urban charter school in this case study. Whether the organizational policies and practices of charter schools are mostly similar to or different from those of traditional public schools was difficult to measure as an attribute impacting academic achievement but is worth exploring. Moreover, the impact of family, the students' neighborhoods, and the school as a social entity were influential on student achievement and could not be ignored. Thus, students' backgrounds and socialization were embedded within this study as a framework for understanding their perceptions. Therefore, the social influence of schools and their role in student educational experiences is the focus of the following subsection.

Social Influence of Schools

Historically, schools were important parts of the community and had significant influence on students and their families. In the early 1900s, "To handle the growing numbers of immigrant children and newly freed slaves, they [progressive school reformers] advocated for the public schools to be used to socialize and to train these children to meet the needs of the new industrial economy" (Kinsler & Gamble, 2001, p. 7). Schools were developed to help provide a skill set for children to grow up to be productive citizens in the community. Schools were influential in that they served as the hubs of communities and extracurricular as well as community events were an important part of the daily happenings in and around schools.

Today, schools are not necessarily the central hubs of the community, however schools still serve a very powerful role in helping to shape communities and are broadly affected by the neighborhoods surrounding the school. Many parents choose where they will live based on the schools in the neighborhoods. Real estate values are higher in areas where there are good schools and schools attract business and industry to towns, cities, and states. Likewise, communities with poor, low-performing schools create pockets of inequality and are typically surrounded by poverty. Orfield (2013) states, “Where a family lives generally determines the quality of the schools its children attend” (p. 40).

Schools are greatly impacted by the wealth or lack thereof in the surrounding community. Belfield and Levin (2013) state, “Schools are critical spaces of shared learning, socialization, and citizenship building for society, and Asian, Black, Latino, Native American, and White public school students usually have little to no daily contact with each other across racial lines” (p. 221). Therefore, it is vitally important that schools provide opportunities for students to learn in a socially just environment where each child has an opportunity to learn in a quality school taught by highly qualified teachers. Moreover, Brown (2011) posits,

Teachers who have made great commitments to the education of African American students must keep a greater social context of the conditions African Americans face in American society. Their instructional, social, communicative choices will either reflect or retract a belief of excellence. (p. 617)

High quality teachers have tremendous influence on the social, emotional, and developmental progress of students that impact their ability to perform in the classroom and to be prepared for life outside it.

The stakes for disadvantaged Black students are high because their academic success depends on the educational opportunities afforded them by the schools they choose to attend. Sir Ken Robinson (2013) provides the foreword in Chaltain (2014) and states,

Education is always and inevitably a personal and social process. For communities and their children, going to school isn't about raising national test scores or the merits of core standards. It's about social aspirations and personal opportunity, public hopes and private fears. In America, education is also meant to be about social entitlement and human rights. As Sam Chaltain puts it, school should be about giving everyone 'an equal shot at success.' If so, the culture of schools themselves could not be more important and public policies should support them in promoting these values. (p. x)

Given the importance of high quality education as a key to future success, schools play a vital role in influencing socialization of students and creating social capacity for students to navigate the world they will enter when they leave school. Shaping social processes and functions so that schools work effectively to equip students with the tools they need is a crucial part of education and one examined when looking at the educational experiences of the disadvantaged Black middle school student participants in this case study.

The “No Excuses” charter schools like Promise Academy in New York City represent other successful organizational and social behaviors of charter school educators. Promise Academy educators combine community services from the Harlem

Children's Zone (HCZ) to ensure the educational and social milieu extends beyond the school to the students' environment. Educators provide support to help students develop the cultural capital they will need to navigate the world outside of school. However, research conducted by Dobbie and Fryer (2011) purport that the results in Harlem are attributed by school inputs and not the community programs provided, thus reinforcing the precept that charter schools can make a difference for students despite claims made by "... James S. Coleman et al. (1966), in their famous report on equality of educational opportunity, argue that schools alone cannot treat the problem of chronic underachievement in urban schools" (as cited by Dobbie & Fryer, 2011, p. 159).

To synthesize the attributes of charter schools and their influence on student achievement is to acknowledge that the results are inconsistent. Studies reveal results based on varying criteria, controls, locations, and within the context of the state and local laws that apply. There is no one size fits all model for charter school effectiveness just as there is no one size fits all model for traditional public schools. Easley (2011) states,

Without doubt, the theory-of-action that standards (along with the coupling of accountability) will forge educational equity is hollow. As such, a recognition of the intersections among educational standards, the educational debt, the content gap, and the cultural capital for families is necessary for understanding how opportunities to learn function in tandem with standards to inform educational equity. (p. 228)

What is clear is that research indicates that teachers matter and that having high expectations is key to Black middle school students believing in themselves and feeling a sense of belonging in the school they attend (Good, Grumley, & Roy, 2003; Rodriguez & Bellanca, 2007). Educators that place emphasis on building relationships with students

and creating a culture and climate in which everyone feels welcome and a part of the school community are vital to improve student buy-in and achievement (Farr, 2010; Jensen, 2009; Pipher, 2002). School culture as an influence on disadvantaged Black middle school student experiences in school is another key element of the conceptual framework examined.

Influence of School Culture

Informally, it has been said that culture is the way we do things here. The culture of schools includes the subtle nuances that are interwoven throughout the school building and the people within schools. However, school culture is also the deliberate rules, values, and beliefs established and followed within a school. Schein (1997) states,

Culture as a concept has had a long and checkered history. It has been used by the layperson as a word to indicate sophistication, as when we say that someone is very 'cultured.' It has been used by anthropologists to refer to the customs and rituals that societies develop over the course of their history. In the last decade or so it has been used by some organizational researchers and managers to indicate the climate and practices that organizations develop around their handling of people or to refer to the espoused values and credo of an organization. (as cited in Kinsler & Gamble, 2001, p. 57)

The climate within a school is very important because it creates the feeling when one walks through the doors. In its most simplified terms, it is the atmosphere and climate of a school. It is that unmistakable feeling of warmth, caring, and a great learning environment or the cold, sterile feeling of a school without the personal elements that make a school a special place for learning. Moreover, Deal and Peterson (1999) explain that the beliefs, practices, and traditions that schools maintain over time are the culture of the school.

Kinsler and Gamble (2001) note that when most people think about schools they think about their past experiences and usually have an impression about schools based on their personal experience. The culture of school is important because it creates the memories and lasting impressions students will have about school while also creating the daily experiences that make school a pleasant experience or drudgery. Furthermore, Kinsler and Gamble (2001) purport,

A significant component of a school's culture is the status attributed to the school by the teachers, students, parents, and the larger society. The primary factor in determining the status of a school, interestingly, is not academic achievement, but rather, the social-economic status of the children who attend. (p. 81)

Perceptions of students, parents, and others in the community are great indicators of how well schools are doing. "Where teachers, administrators and students are pleased and feel proud to be a part of a particular school environment, morale is high and the culture is supportive and reinforcing" (Kinsler & Gamble, 2001, p. 81). Positive morale and a positive culture make for a positive and nurturing school for students where learning happens and students have positive educational experiences. Conversely, where there is low morale and a sense that the school is not going in the right direction creates a negative or toxic culture where student learning and achievement is not the focus and may in fact suffer.

School culture is an important part of the educational experience for all students; but particularly for disadvantaged Black students who need positive learning experiences for success. Deal and Peterson (1999) state,

It is clearly time to reconsider and rethink the issues and importance of school culture in today's educational environment. There is no doubt in our minds that students have the right to the best schools we can provide. There is also little doubt that teaching staff and administrators can lead the way to successful cultures where all students learn. (p. xi)

The culture of a school plays an important role in the teaching and learning that happens within the school. The students in this study, who departed traditional public schools for a charter school experience, were obviously seeking a certain type of school environment in order to be successful. Learning more about their hopes and dreams through their stories was a vital part of this research study.

Chapter II provided the literature review, the history of charter schools in the U.S. and their development in North Carolina. The chapter also focused on similarities and differences between charter schools and traditional public schools. Moreover, Chapter II stipulated the attributes of the conceptual framework for the study including CRT, the critical lens through which every aspect of the study was founded along with the instructional, organizational, social and cultural characteristics of successful schools and how this framework contributed to the overall structural underpinnings of this research study.

The conceptual framework for this study was the premise with which I explored the dynamics and nuances of the research participants and their school, Success Academy. It is not a prescribed set of beliefs or assumptions but the point of view from which the data was interpreted (Kilbourne, 2006). It was through this conceptual framework lens that the data analysis was expressed and conveyed. Next, Chapter III

discloses the research methodology in detail as well as the methods that were employed as a part of the data collection and data analysis strategies.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the research questions regarding the lived experiences of disadvantaged Black middle school students as presented in Chapter I. Therefore, the given research perspective was a qualitative research approach of listening and retelling the stories of the participants to explore the perceptions of the positive and negative factors that influence the student participants' educational experiences and the instructional, organizational, social, and cultural factors that influence their investment in their education. This qualitative approach was critical to the study as a methodological perspective since the study did not seek an absolute truth but rather to gain a greater understanding as to the choices the student participants made and how these choices have impacted their educational experiences. Because of the limited scope of this research study, a case study approach was applied to gain insight into the lives of a small group of Black middle school students attending an urban, charter school in North Carolina, called Success Academy. Chapter III explains the methodology as well as the methods employed as part of the methodology. This chapter is organized into five sections. They are (a) research design, (b) data collection, (c) participant recruitment, (d) summary of research goals, and (e) data analysis. Next, I reintroduce the research setting that was discussed in Chapter I.

Success Academy

This research study took place at Success Academy, a tuition free public charter school in a large urban city in North Carolina. Success Academy is a small, high poverty K–8 charter school with approximately 215 students in grades K–8. The average class size in K–5 is 16 and the average class size in grades six through eight is 18. There are eight middle school teachers at Success Academy teaching approximately 90 middle school students in grades six through eight. Success claims to offer a rigorous curriculum using the North Carolina Standard Course of Study with a differentiated instructional approach to meet the unique needs of all learners. Additionally, the school touts a diverse family atmosphere to cater to the individual needs of students. Success Academy promotes the fact that their diverse staff helps students see global learning and helps students develop the skills necessary to be globally competitive with 21st century skills, equipped to lead and live while providing service to the community.

Success Academy is on the campus of a large church complex. The school shares office space with the church offices, and it is evident that the influence of the church is felt based upon the expectations and conduct of students and staff alike. The facility is relatively new but is very small when compared to a traditional public middle school.

North Carolina School Report Card

According to the North Carolina School Report Card for 2013–2014, a tool to inform parents and the public about the performance of North Carolina’s schools, Success Academy had a school performance letter grade of D. However, Success Academy met its growth target. “The Growth Status measures the academic growth of a

school's students from the previous year to the current year” (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015). In North Carolina, schools are now measured for student academic performance and growth with a letter grade of A-F as discussed in Chapter II, according to the following formula,

As required by state legislation, the School Performance Grades are based 80 percent on the school's achievement score and 20 percent on students' academic growth. The only exception to this is if a school meets expected growth but inclusion of the school's growth reduces the school's performance score and grade. In that case, a school may choose to use the School Achievement Score only to determine the performance score and grade. All public schools, including charter, receive grades. (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015, para. 5)

Success Academy also had a 95.7% attendance rate and no acts of crime or violence for 2013–2014. While the letter grade of D might indicate to some that Success is not performing well, the students and parents who participated in the research study would argue that this measure doesn't accurately represent their school or the educational experiences that occur on a daily basis.

Success Academy, like most charter schools has an application and lottery process. According to the school's policy, all students are admitted to Success Academy by lottery. Students' names are placed in the lottery and at an announced open session board meeting the names are pulled one at a time until all vacancies at each grade level are filled.

Success Academy states that all students have an equal opportunity for admission and if there are more students than vacancies, students' names will be placed on a waiting list and called if a vacancy becomes available. The application is very simple including

the following information: the student's name, gender, date of birth, nickname, and grade to be entered in 2015. Additionally, the parents' names, addresses, email addresses, place of employment and phone numbers are included as well as any siblings who live in the home and whether they attended Success Academy and the years of their attendance.

My reflections on my visits to Success Academy included a warm, caring, and nurturing school. Parents, when visiting the school were friendly and engaged in small talk. Students appeared happy and well behaved for the most part. Occasionally there was a student who misbehaved or was crying but this was a rare occurrence. In fact, the staff maintained a very tightly controlled structure and students seemed to function well within that structure.

The facility's cafeteria is located within a multi-purpose room with a piano and a baptismal pool. The facilities are small for a school and the middle school students share a long hallway with third, fourth, and fifth grade students. The school's media center is housed in one room and the front office area is a large open space with a huge desk for the two office personnel that work there.

The office staff seemed to know everyone and worked well together to help visitors and to support students. They too facilitated the structured atmosphere observed in the school. Teachers were observed supervising students and even eating their lunch while standing up and monitoring students. Students were observed to know the routines and to function well within them. Everyone encountered by the researcher was kind, friendly, and helpful.

Research Design

The conceptual underpinnings and philosophical background of the researcher were intricately woven into the research design. This qualitative case study was employed to deliberately provide me with a blank slate with which to begin understanding the educational experiences of the student participants from their own voices. It was my intent to separate my own initial perceptions and to begin fresh with the perceptions of the participants to afford this research study a clean canvas to be written upon. Agee (2009) notes that the purpose behind the establishment of qualitative research questions is to “. . . articulate what a researcher wants to know about the intentions and perspectives of those involved in social interactions” (p. 432). Therefore, the research questions emerged from the researchers’ desire to understand the perspectives of others, the perspectives of the student participants attending Success Academy, a small urban charter school after leaving traditional public schools. Moreover, learning about the students’ educational experiences in their own words about these school settings was a goal for this research.

Agee (2009) cites Geertz (1973), ‘To reduce the puzzlement—what manner of men are these?’ (p. 432); therefore, these research questions were investigated:

1. What factors positively and negatively influence the educational experiences of the disadvantaged Black middle school students in this case study?
2. What instructional, organizational, social, or cultural attributes motivate the disadvantaged Black middle school student participants to invest in their academic future when enrolled in their current charter school?

Perceptions of what positively or negatively influenced the student participants' educational experiences were the crux of this research study. Subsequently, an understanding of the perceptions of the student participants on their own academic achievement and educational experiences was examined through a case study approach. A case study was determined to be the best approach by the researcher in an effort to interpret what was going on, in, and around the lives of the student participants as they matriculate through Success Academy and reflect on the traditional public schools they vacated.

Qualitative Case Study Approach

The decision of which research approach to select is a very important one that guides the entire research study. Qualitative researchers employ case studies to gain a greater understanding of the lived experiences of a single case to a group with similar characteristics. Glesne (2011) cites Stake (1995) when considering a case study, "The common denominator is that each—the person, the village, the event, the program—is a *bounded* integrated system with working parts" (p. 22). The researcher determines what is "*bounded*" when determining who or what to include in the case study (Glesne, 2011). For the purposes of this research study, the case was bounded by time, location, grade span, and the race of participants.

Stake (2000) as cited in Glesne (2011) identifies several different types of case studies but for the purposes of this research, a "collective case study" (p. 22) allowed for the investigation of a population of students; disadvantaged Black middle school students who previously attended traditional public schools but opted for a charter school

experience. Moreover, Schram (2006) interjects, case study is a way of “conceptualizing human social behavior or merely as a way of encapsulating it, its strategic value lies in its ability to draw attention to what can be learned from the single case” (as cited in Glesne, 2011, p. 22). Furthermore, Flyvbjerg (2006) cites Hans Eysenck (1976) as having shifted from a belief that case studies were “anecdotes” to later acknowledging that “sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases—not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something!” (p. 224). It was my hope to learn something about the student participants in this case study that aids in understanding their lived experiences from their own perspectives. Moreover, to facilitate additional depth in understanding the students’ lived experiences was sought by interviewing five of the students’ parents and three of their teachers.

This qualitative case study included gathering data from a variety of sources. Time was spent with male and female student participants in their educational setting over a period of three-month span of time in which observations were conducted. Student participants and several of their parents were interviewed. Teachers who directly educate the students were asked to complete an email questionnaire about their teaching experiences and their perceptions of their students’ experiences. Moreover, a comprehensive records review of the cumulative records of the research participants was conducted to acquire information about the students’ backgrounds, their educational experiences prior to attending Success Academy, and to better understand their current academic performance. Finally, a public records review of Success Academy was conducted and presented later in this chapter using information shared on their website

along with information obtained from the Public Schools of North Carolina (2015) regarding the academic performance of Success Academy.

Data Collection

Data collection is the means by which the researcher seeks to “co-construct information” with the research participants (Glesne, 2011). Additionally, Flyvbjerg (2006) states,

If one assumes that research, like other learning processes can be described by the phenomenology for human learning, it then becomes clear that the most advanced form of understanding is achieved when researchers place themselves within the context being studied. (p. 236)

This research study utilized several methods and procedures of data collection including the researcher as part of the context by conducting multiple observations, student, parent, and teacher interviews, cumulative records review, and a focus group interview.

Because intense observation is a critical component to research discoveries (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 226), it was my desire to discover the nuances of the real-life experiences of the student participants from a first hand perspective. The goal of the researcher was to interact with the participants on a personal level and to gain a deep understanding of the students’ perspectives to accurately record and share their stories. Therefore, I spent a three-month span of time visiting Success Academy conducting observations, conducting interviews, and recording field notes of my observations and experiences.

Ten student participants were to be interviewed for the research study but one student moved prior to being interviewed. During the three-month span of time, I

interviewed each of the nine student participants individually using the Student Interview Questionnaire, Appendix D. The student interviews totaled ten hours with each interview being approximately 45 minutes to one hour.

All student interviews were audio recorded for accuracy and for transcription. The audio recordings were kept in a secure locked location that only the researcher had the key and all audio recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of the research study. I took anecdotal notes of each interview and observation that were recorded, analyzed and included in the research findings. During each visit to Success Academy students were cooperative and willing to discuss their educational experiences. I also conducted a focus group session with all of the participants that lasted one and ½ hours (See Appendix H). During the focus group session, however, one of the participants, Joshua, was excused because he was very disruptive to group meeting.

In most cases students did not wish to create a pseudonym for themselves but rather asked if their real name could be used. I informed the participants that the creation of a pseudonym was for their protection and to maintain their confidentiality. The researcher, with the exception of Darkwing, who chose her own pseudonym, assigned a pseudonym for each participant.

Participants were informed if questions made them feel uncomfortable they could let me know and I would help them in any way possible. Participants were also advised that they didn't have to answer any question they didn't feel comfortable answering. At no time did a participant abstain from answering a question because of their comfort level. All of the student participants answered the questions from what seemed to be the

best of their ability. I was quite impressed at the level of concentration and reflection the student participants used when answering questions. Students seemed to put a lot of thought into their responses prior to answering as evidenced by pauses, silences, and facial expressions observed by the observer.

Originally, six of the nine parents agreed to be interviewed but due to unresolvable scheduling conflicts with one parent, five of the nine parents were interviewed. All parent interviews were phone interviews and I took verbatim notes of each phone interview totaling five hours (See Appendix E). Each parent participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect his/her identity and the parents were permitted to select a pseudonym of their choosing although they all allowed me to select it for them.

Eight Success Academy teachers who previously taught in traditional public schools were recruited to complete an online Google form questionnaire (See Appendix G). Only three teachers agreed to participate. The Google form questionnaire automatically captured the teacher interview data since the teachers themselves entered their responses directly into the Google form. I estimated it would take each teacher an hour to complete the questionnaire, for a total of three hours of teacher questionnaire data and I reserved the right to contact teachers by phone when there were questions about their responses. Each teacher participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect his/her identity.

I conducted a thorough public records review of Success Academy, reviewing their website, their NC School Report Card (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2011, 2015), the school Facebook page, the U.S. Census Bureau, and other public websites like

www.greatschools.org, www.schooldigger.com, and www.zillow.com. Likewise, I spent time at the school doing a cumulative records review of all of the student participants. This process was spent to verify the students' grades, EOG scores, attendance records, and family information about their siblings' school attendance. It was very important to me to gather as much information about the school and the participants as possible. The objective of this data collection process was that through the use of varied methods, meaning would unfold crystallizing to allow the researcher to understand the multiple perspectives presented and to synthesize those perspectives by coding them into themes for data analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Glesne, 2011).

Observations

One important data collection tool during this research study was observation. "Observation has been characterized as 'the fundamental base of all research methods' in the social and behavioral sciences" (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 389, as cited in Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011, p. 467). I conducted numerous observations over a three-month span of time totaling three hours. Each time I visited Success Academy, I not only observed the participants but the non-participants, the staff, and the whole school environment. My goal was to be as unobtrusive as possible so as not to interfere with the research collection. However, due to my extended period of time in the school I became a member of the Success family. I was warmly received by the staff and greeted by the participants and other students and teachers alike.

Participant Recruitment

The goal of this research study was to gain rich data from the student participants. Therefore, 10–15 male and female middle school student participants were sought. During the recruitment phase the researcher sent packets of information with Appendix A, the Consent for a Minor to Act as a Human Participant: Long Form, and Appendix B, a Consent to Act as a Human Participant for the parent to participate as well. The goal of the researcher was to obtain a clear understanding from the student participants about what factors have positively or negatively impacted their educational experiences and what instructional, organizational, social, or cultural attributes of schools motivate them to invest in their education. Moreover, a goal was to gain insight from their parents' and teachers' perspectives as well. Thus, 10–15 parents of the student participants and five to seven teachers of the students were also recruited. I emailed all eight middle school teachers at Success Academy to recruit them to participate in the research study. Only three teachers agreed to participate.

Selection of Participants

This study was designed to involve the selection of disadvantaged Black middle school students who attend Success Academy, a small, urban charter middle school and previously attended traditional public schools. The researcher consulted with the principal/director of Success, who generated a pool of male and female students that might meet the selection criteria. The participant pool was created in this way due to the problem that arose with the selection process discussed in Chapter II.

The principal of Success Academy did not have access to verification of students' free and reduced lunch status. This information is confidential and was unavailable. As described in Chapter I, free and reduced lunch status was originally to be used as the criteria for determining if students were disadvantaged students and subsequently a criterion for participant recruitment. However, because the school administrator could not verify the free and reduced lunch status of students due to confidentiality requirements, the administrator used knowledge of the families to create the participant recruitment pool of Black middle school students. The inability to verify the participant pools' low-income status directly impacted one of the main criteria of the research study. Therefore, the researcher employed an additional criterion to be used for participant recruitment in the study.

All of the students who attend Success Academy are considered disadvantaged students because they attend a predominantly low-income or high poverty charter middle school. With 84% of Success Academy's students eligible for free and reduced lunch, according to the federal Food and Nutrition Services (FNS), an overwhelming majority of Success Academy students' family incomes meet the federal poverty level. Therefore, the unique lived experiences of the student participants in this study were in part based upon their experiences attending a high poverty school. Subsequently, the researcher made the decision to incorporate all Black students as disadvantaged students included in the recruitment pool by their school administrator due to this additional criterion.

The description of the parents' education level and employment presented later in this chapter indicated that in a few cases some of the student participants might not have

met the criteria for low-income students. I suspect that based on individual and focus group interviews and observations with the student participants that approximately six of the nine students would have likely qualified for free and reduced lunch and thereby would have met the initial criteria established. Nevertheless, I made the decision to proceed with the research study because despite this important criterion the stories of the student participants attending a predominantly Black, high poverty charter school was still valuable and the students attending Success Academy are disadvantaged because of the lack of resources of other traditional public middle schools due to their high poverty status. Moreover, I believed that these stories added to the body of research on Black middle school students' perceptions about their educational experiences having attended a traditional public school and now an urban charter middle school.

All of the participants were added to the pool if they were a Black male or female and previously attended a traditional public school and subsequently chose to leave the traditional public school and transferred to Success. The student participants in this study were male and female, student participants under the age of 18. Therefore, parent permission was obtained in order to interview participants for the study. I could have asked parents if students were on free or reduced lunch but made the decision not to ask due to the possibility that this intrusion into the personal and financial status of the students through parent report might deter parents from allowing their child to participate in the research study.

Students were selected from sixth, seventh, or eighth grade. In the event there were a large number of students willing to participate, the researcher planned to randomly

select male and female students from the eighth grade with a goal of an equal number of male and female students. However, during the recruitment phase there wasn't an abundance of participants in the recruitment pool so I adhered to the selection of students from sixth, seventh, or eighth grade. Then the pool was narrowed to ten participants based on the number of parents that granted permission for their child to participate in the research study. Over the course of data collection, one participant moved so the student pool became nine participants.

Ethical Considerations

Entering the research setting as a stranger to the student participants was a concern as to how the students would accept me or be willing to participate in the study. Because their parents had agreed and granted permission for them to participate did not mean the students themselves would want to participate. Additionally, I wanted to fit into the research setting and not appear to be too obtrusive in the setting since the purpose was to conduct observations and interviews over time.

Each time I traveled to Success Academy students greeted me with inquisitive eyes that indicated they wondered who I was. Therefore, I dressed in a business casual style and ultimately made the decision not to tell the student participants that I am an educator and a middle school principal. I informed the student participants that I am a doctoral student because I didn't want them to see me as an authority figure. I also didn't want my background to cause the students to act a certain way around me, feel uncomfortable about participating, or think that I might be judging them in some way. My occupation held no bearing on this research study nor do I think withholding my

employment information impacted the data collection in any way. My sole goal as researcher was to establish a relationship with the students, to record their stories, and to learn from them about their educational experiences. I think this goal was accomplished through numerous interactions and being visible in the school over the three months span.

Triangulation of Data

The use of multiple data sources including a student focus group, interviews of students, parents, and teachers, along with a thorough records review and observations provided triangulation of data represented by Figure 2. Gibbs (2007) expounds,

‘It is always possible to make mistakes in your interpretation and a different view on the situation can illuminate limitations or suggest which of competing versions is more likely’ and, when what people say is inconsistent with what people do, ‘forms of data triangulation (e.g., observing actions as well as interviewing respondents) are useful . . . , not to show that informants are lying or wrong, but to reveal new dimensions of social reality where people do not always act consistently.’ Inconsistencies can help to reveal the complexity of a situation. (as cited in Glesne, 2011, p. 47)

Therefore, becoming a part of the research setting, interacting with staff and students over time, and reflecting on all of the data collected through the lens of CRT and the conceptual framework provided a rich scaffold for meaning making.

The case study approach allowed this triangulation of data to develop. “The advantage of the case study is that it can ‘close in’ on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 235). The records review to examine the students’ cumulative records for documentation of their school attendance and academic performance was an important part of the data recording. Also, reviewing the existing information about Success Academy from both

biased and unbiased sources created a better-defined representation of the research setting.

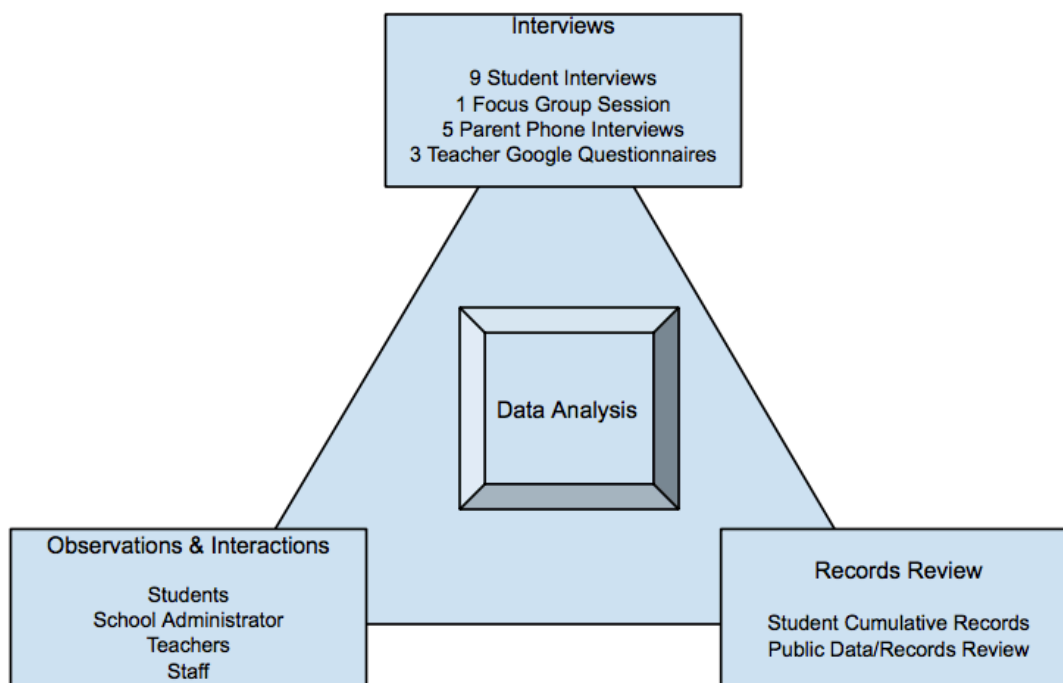


Figure 2. Triangulation of Data Collection and Analysis.

Participants were observed at Success Academy and all of the data combined for the purpose of establishing themes. Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, and Robertson (2013) note, “Researchers have characterized the QCS [Qualitative Case Study] approach as a contextually based tradition; difficulty exists in separating the case from the context in which it occurs” (p. 1268). For the purposes of this research study, there was no desire to separate the case from the context in which it occurred because my belief is that the case and the context are intricately interwoven to reflect the reality for the research participants. It was my hope to fully describe the context and the case as mutually

existing entities. The next section will share information about one data collection method that was important to this research study, observations.

Summary of Research Goals

Charter schools have received a lot of attention in recent years with the amazing growth of these schools. All students and their parents now have choices that only the wealthiest of parents had with regards to educating their children. Moreover, Betts et al. (2006) state,

Proponents [of school choice] argue that more affluent families have long enjoyed school choice, through both private schools and the ability to move to better schools by buying a house in the school's attendance area. Wider school choice merely opens up some of these same opportunities to less affluent families, proponents contend. (p. v)

School choice creates opportunities for students who previously attended traditional public schools to consider their options, and the role of choice has become for some the equivalent of a civil right. If indeed, "education is a great equalizer," as Mann (1848) championed it to be, the ability to choose one's educational setting is the embodiment of equal opportunity for all. The participants in this study chose a charter school setting for their educational experience.

Much research exists on charter schools and their impact on academic achievement, and inarguably the results are mixed depending on the numerous and varied criteria studied (Betts et al., 2006; Frankenberg, 2011; Nelson et al., 2004; Scott & Villavicencio, 2009; Zimmer & Buddin, 2006). Furthermore, research has been conducted about charter schools and their influence on traditional public schools and the

children that remain (Gleason et al., 2010; Imberman, 2011). However, this research has largely included the perspectives of teachers, administrators, policymakers, and parents. A dearth in the research exists from the perceptions of students themselves; specifically, disadvantaged Black middle school students, whom school choice proponents tout school choice is designed to protect.

This research study was designed to gain a greater understanding of the lived experiences of Black middle school students who opted for charter schools. The impact of this choice is one that may have lifelong effects. Therefore, it is imperative that we better understand their choice and the rationale behind it to gain a greater perspective on the educational experience of these students. Moreover, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) purport,

The voice of people of color is required for a complete analysis of the educational system . . . Without authentic voices of people of color it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities. (p. 58)

Giles and Hughes (2009) acknowledge, “Living in America as a person of color is indeed a unique kind of experiment filled with noteworthy observations depending upon the lens and/or lenses that particular person employs to view and understand what they are seeing and experiencing” (p. 688). Therefore, the use of CRT as a conceptual lens by which to examine the perspectives of the student participants involved in the case study was a means to better understand the students’ educational experiences.

This research study examined the perspectives and perceptions of disadvantaged Black male and female middle school students. This is a qualitative case study of one

small, high poverty K–8 charter school in a large urban city in North Carolina. Nine middle school male and female students were interviewed and participated in a focus group. Additionally, five of the students' parents were interviewed by phone and three of the student's teachers at Success Academy responded to an open-ended Google form questionnaire about their experiences with disadvantaged low-income student participants. Observations were conducted over a three-month span of time in 30-minute to one-hour increments and a thorough records review was conducted of the students' cumulative records to evaluate the students' academic achievement, and of the public records of the research setting, Success Academy. All of these methods were used to triangulate the data for data analysis.

The data was approached with the belief that through the process of coding interview responses the researcher would identify commonalities or divergences of thinking, perceptions, or experiences. It is through the data analyses that the intricacies of the research study emerge. Through the interpretation of data, an illumination of the perceptions of the students through their own lived experiences and through their own voices surfaced, complete with silences, selectivities, or slippages (Casey, 1995).

The voices of Black middle school students have most often been overlooked in the research but the perceptions of these students is essential to have a better understanding of how traditional public elementary schools impacted and shaped their educational experiences, thus preparing them for the transition to middle school. The middle school transition is one that is very challenging for students due to the intricacies

involved with the developmental progression of adolescence. Yet, middle school students' perceptions are often overlooked with a priority on high school students.

This case study aims to examine the educational experiences of Black, middle school male and female students who transferred from a public school to a charter school. Some are considered disadvantaged because of their perceived financial status, while others are considered disadvantaged because they attend a high poverty school in a high poverty, urban community. Moreover, many of the student participants are considered disadvantaged by the researcher because most live in single parent homes. All of these factors pose additional challenges for the participants and while these challenges exist and are acknowledged, it is also important to emphasize the need for more information about Black middle school students and their educational experiences prior to their entrance into high school.

Middle school attendance and grades are key indicators to determining academic success in high school and the ability of a high school student to be deemed college ready (Allensworth, Gwynne, Moore, & de la Torre, 2014). Because the academic progress or lack thereof in middle school is a key determinant to future success in high school, learning more about the educational experiences from the student participants' voices about their experiences during the critical middle grades years is largely uncharted territory and for these at-risk students, the information gained could be a valuable addition to the body of research to assist educators and policymakers with strategic planning and funding for educational access, promotion of social justice, and equality of educational opportunities for all students. Moreover, the inclusion of the voices of the

parents and teachers of the student participants is a unique perspective that benefits the body of literature to better understand the lived experiences of these youth.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an ongoing process throughout the data collection phase of the research study. I was constantly reading, rereading, and analyzing the transcripts, documents from the records review, and focusing on the observation data to uncover what the data revealed. All of the data components were grouped into six data sets. These data sets included individual student interview transcripts, parent phone interview transcripts, teacher Google form questionnaires, focus group transcripts, observations field notes, and records review documents.

Each individual piece of each data set was analyzed individually line by line to identify codes that emerged. Gibbs (2007) states, “Coding is how you define what the data you are analyzing are about” (as cited in Glesne, 2011, p. 194). Moreover, Glesne (2011) reports, “Line-by-line coding helps to immerse you in the data and discover what concepts they have to offer” (p. 195). Codes were classified into categories and subcategories, which were then merged into categories of focus for further analysis. Once categories were identified, the data set as a whole was then analyzed looking for recurring subcategories and categories within each of the data sets. All of the categories and subcategories for each whole data set were then merged into categories of focus.

The identified categories of focus were compared and contrasted with the other categories of focus from each of the other data sets to establish a list of recurring categories of focus for further analysis. These recurring categories of focus were then

analyzed again, and out of the synthesis of these categories, eleven overarching categories were identified for discussion. Figure 3 represents the methodology for analyzing the data sets.

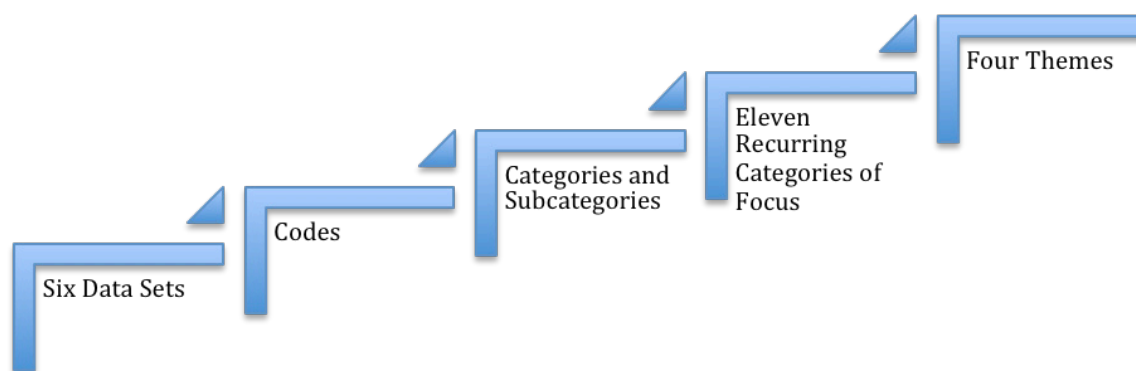


Figure 3. Methodology.

Throughout the process of analyzing the data to identify recurring categories of focus, I continually thought about the data using critical race theory (CRT) as a lens to examine and reflect upon all of the data collected. Because CRT begins with the presupposition that educators may approach disadvantaged students with deficit thinking in mind (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Yosso, 2006), it is important to add to the body of research by sharing the stories of the research participants in this case study. While the participants' stories may differ from White or higher-income students due to the environmental and economic nature of their experiences, their understandings about school, teaching, and learning are valuable and beneficial to influence the educational landscape for future researchers and policymakers. I also approached the data and reflected upon it by thinking about the conceptual framework that included four

major attributes of successful schools identified in Chapter II—the instructional, organizational, social, and cultural attributes of successful schools.

The eleven categories that emerged were—perceptions about schools, stress in schools, high quality teaching and learning, student performance, class size, relationships, principal behaviors, bullying, parent and teacher interactions, transitioning between students, and race. Figure 4 presents the eleven recurring categories of focus that emerged from the six data sets.

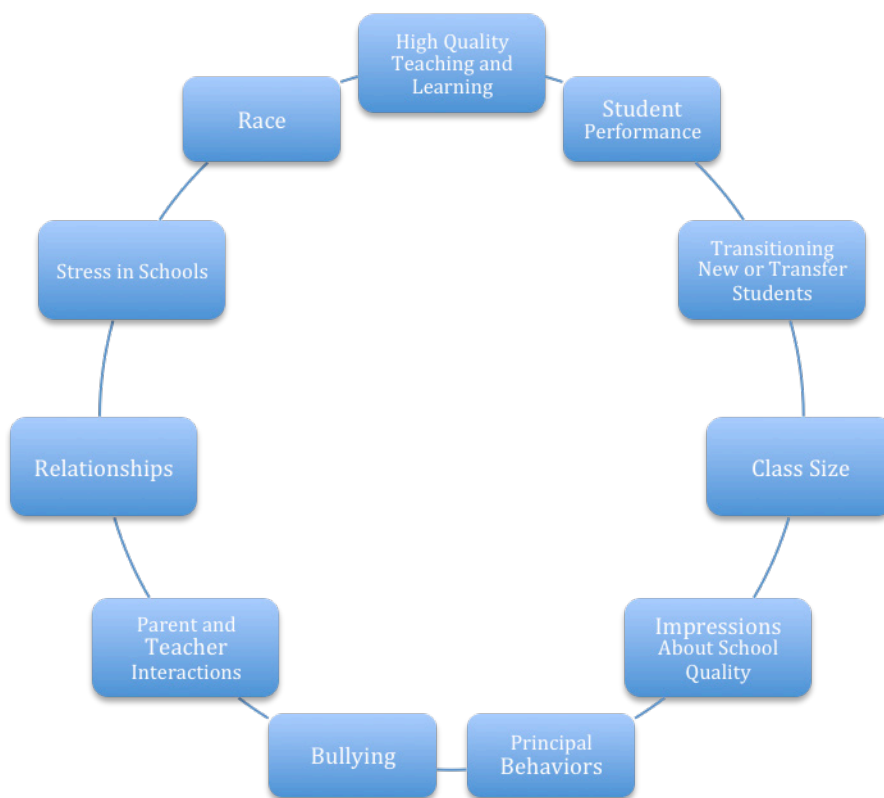


Figure 4. Recurring Categories of Focus.

Through a second round of analysis, I studied the narratives included in the discussion section and examined the big ideas that emerged. These big ideas formed four

themes. The four themes that emerged are—the purpose of schools, the understood value on education, the needs of students in schools, and the absence of race. These four themes will be discussed in detail in Chapter V and VI (see Figure 5).

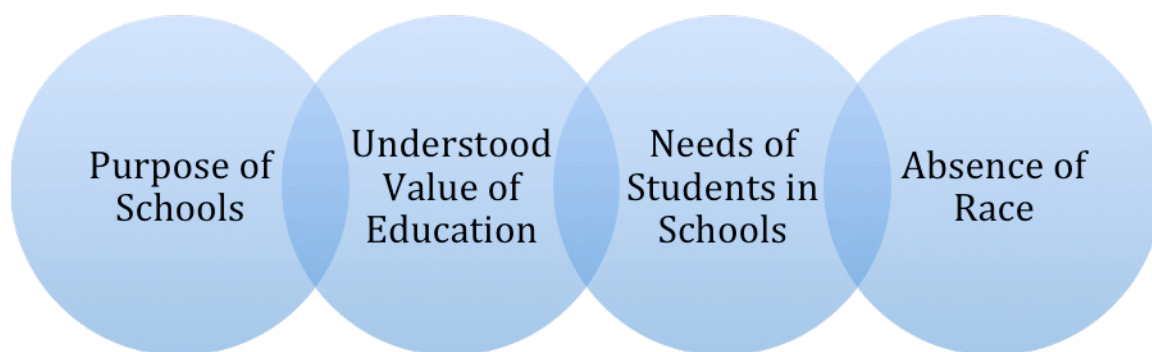


Figure 5. Four Themes.

This chapter specified the qualitative research design, approach, and rationale. Chapter III described the participant recruitment process, the data collection strategies, summary of research goals, and data analysis processes. Chapter III also presented an ethical consideration that I grappled with when approaching the research setting and participants while also reiterating the limitation of using the term low-income students due to the unavailability of verification of free and reduced lunch status as a criterion for the establishment of the student participant pool. Therefore, the researcher added an additional criterion for student participants, the use of disadvantaged students due to their attending a high poverty school.

The description of the research participants is included in Chapter IV. Eckert Tolle (1999) states, “To know yourself as the Being underneath the thinker, the stillness underneath the mental noise, the love and joy underneath the pain, is freedom, salvation,

enlightenment.” I contend to know others is to understand their struggles, their needs, and their value. To understand others is to understand oneself in relation. Therefore, Chapter IV provides the background description needed to better understand the lived experiences of the study participants.

CHAPTER IV

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Chapter III provided the methodology for the research study, reintroduced the research setting, provided the participant recruitment process, and outlined the data collection and data analysis processes. As was aforementioned in Chapter III, knowing the research participants' background information will help understand the lived experiences of the disadvantaged student participants in this study, as well as their parents and teachers. Next, this chapter will begin with the description of student participants.

Description of Student Participants

The student participants in this case study were Black middle school students in grades six through eight who currently attend Success Academy. A profile of the student participants is provided in Table 1. Their candid responses to the interview questions provided rich data that will be presented in Chapters V and VI.

Table 1

Student Participant Description

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Gender	Grade	Age	Parent(s)/Guardian(s)
Mo	Black	Male	7	12	Mom and Dad
RJ	Black	Male	7	12	Divorced Parents (Live with Mom)
Sarah	Black	Female	8	13	Mother

Table 1

(Cont.)

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Gender	Grade	Age	Parent(s)/Guardian(s)
Jaylen	Black	Female	6	12	Mother
Carmen	Black	Female	8	13	Sister
Heaven	Black	Female	6	11	Mother
Bianca	Black	Female	7	12	Mom and Dad
Joshua	Black	Male	7	12	Parents Not Married (Live with Mother)
Henry	Black	Male	7	12	Moved prior to being interviewed

Note. Table 1 provides background information about the student participants.

The participants previously attended traditional public schools but opted for the charter school experience. Table 2 denotes the schools the student participants attended prior to transferring to Success Academy. It is worth noting that several of the student participants attended more than three traditional public schools prior to transferring to Success Academy. This prior experience in various traditional public schools added richness to the interview data as the students had multi and varied perspectives on their school experiences not only between traditional public schools and Success Academy but differences in school experiences at various traditional public schools.

There were six female participants and three male participants interviewed. The goal of the researcher was to have an equal number of male and female student participants. However, there weren't an equal number of male and female students who agreed to participate or whose parents agreed for them to participate. It was very important to me to have the perceptions of both male and female participants because

their school experiences may be different and would also provide insight into both gender perspectives on student educational experiences. Therefore, for the purposes of this research study, gender was not controlled for when selecting participants. I wanted to hear the stories of both male and female students to better understand the complexities of life as a disadvantaged Black middle school student attending a small, urban charter school.

Table 2

Public Schools Participants Attended Prior to Enrolling at Success Academy

Pseudonym	Elementary Traditional public schools	Middle Traditional Public schools	Magnet Schools	Charter Schools	Montessori Schools
Mo	4	1		1	
RJ	2	1			
Sarah	2				
Jaylen	1				
Carmen	5	2			
Heaven	4 with one school being out of NC				
Bianca					1
Darkwing	2			1	
Joshua	2		1		
Henry					

Note. Table 2 depicts the number and types of public schools the student participants attended prior to Success Academy

One male, Henry moved prior to being interviewed so for the purposes of the data analysis, the focus will be on the nine student participants interviewed. All students classified themselves as Black students on their demographic profile sheet in their cumulative records. The majority of the students (six students) were twelve years of age, with one participant being 11 and two participants being 13 years of age. Five participants were in the seventh grade with two participants being eighth graders and two participants being sixth graders.

The majority of participants (six of nine students) lived with their mothers. One participant lived with her sister, who adopted her and two participants live with both of their parents. Those participants who lived with their mothers almost always had some contact with their fathers, with the exception of one participant who did not acknowledge any contact with his father.

I spent half a day and examined the cumulative records of the student participants to verify the schools attended in addition to student report because in some cases the student participants could not accurately recall the grades in which they attended certain schools. It was beneficial to the researcher to clear up any confusion that surfaced. However, some critical information was missing from some student's cumulative folders. When asked why that is, I was told that Success Academy sometimes has a difficult time getting the cumulative records from the traditional public schools. The schools don't always readily share information with each other. This is unfortunate because the student is at the center of this adult behavior. Where there is an absence of data, it is noted in Appendix C that the data was unavailable.

Some of the participants attended traditional public schools that had emphasis on particular academic concentrations including magnet schools and Montessori schools. Moreover, the records review revealed interesting details regarding students' academic performance in prior academic years as well as during the current year at Success Academy. The academic changes for student participants with regards to their academic performance and changes in their EOG levels over time are presented in Appendix C. More of the individual background of the student participants will be included in the next section.

Individual Background Description of Student and Parent Participants

Previously in Chapter IV the description of student participants as a collective group and the interview process was outlined in Chapter III. A more individualized background description of each student and parent participants follows, as the detailed, individual information provided a more in-depth examination of the individual participants. The individual background participant data begins with Mo, a Black male seventh-grade student at Success Academy and his mother, Louise.

Mo and Louise

Mo is a very articulate and highly intelligent twelve year old, Black male student. He is academically gifted (AG) and presented himself well at ease and very self-confident. When I first met Mo he readily made eye contact and was well groomed in his school-required uniform. He was wearing khaki pants, a black polo shirt, and a black, hoodie zippered jacket. He was wearing name brand tennis shoes and appeared very

comfortable throughout the interview. Mo was also very opinionated and did not hesitate to share his thoughts during the interview process.

Mo attended four traditional public elementary schools during his elementary school years. He also attended Success Academy at one point as an elementary school student and began his middle school career at a traditional public middle school prior to being recruited to Success Academy to play soccer. The ability to play soccer is very important to Mo and his family and was a vital part of the decision for him to transfer to Success Academy.

Mo lived with both of his parents. His mother and father both received some college education and his parents were both employed by a large metropolitan public school district. Mo's mother, Louise, is a teacher's assistant in a school and his father is a custodian in a school. Louise states she and her husband have been married 14 ½ years and that Mo's sister is 14 years of age. She reports, "We love spending time together hanging out as a family. We've moved around a lot. The kids have been to a couple of different schools but the kids have adjusted well." Mo also has an older sister who previously attended Success Academy and now attends a public specialized academy for students with interests in medicine. Mo's mother, Louise agreed to be interviewed for the research study.

RJ

RJ is an intelligent, Black male student in the seventh grade. He wore large black-rimmed glasses and had bright, inquisitive eyes. RJ presented himself as very fidgety but tough. He began the interview by explaining that his parents were divorced

and that his mother is engaged to another woman. He went on to explain that his father is a doctor and his mother achieved some college. RJ is the oldest of four children and has two sisters and a brother younger than he, none of which attends Success Academy. His brother lives out of the city with his father. His two sisters live with him, his mother, and her partner.

RJ was dressed in his uniform with black pants and a white polo shirt but was dressed more sportily than many students observed. He wore his clothes much more casually and seemed to want to exude the appearance of being cool. He too was very opinionated like Mo and didn't hesitate to tell me what he thought about his school experiences and those of his siblings.

During the interview, RJ often looked around the room, used his hands expressively, and his nonverbal cues readily expressed his thoughts about the questions asked. He openly shared his candid responses and at times jumped around while talking as he attempted to remember things while acknowledging that he struggles with memory. RJ attended two traditional public elementary schools and a traditional public middle school prior to enrolling at Success Academy. His educational experiences were quite interesting and will be discussed in more depth later in Chapters V and VI.

Sarah

Sarah is a 13-year-old Black female student in the eighth grade. She is a beautiful young lady with a lovely white smile and long dark hair. She presented as very self-assured and very popular with her peers. She smiled quite often and was very expressive. Sarah's parents are divorced and her dad lives out of state. Her mother completed her

two-year degree and is a nurse. Her dad completed high school and Sarah has a younger sister who attends Success Academy.

Sarah is an athlete. She is a captain on the basketball team, one of the starting five, and plays volleyball. She is in the Beta Club for academic achievement and an extracurricular club for young ladies that promotes leadership. She was very focused on her academics and her future and presented herself as very responsible. She definitely had the focus to be successful. Sarah attended two traditional public elementary schools prior to enrolling at Success Academy and had some very candid thoughts about her experiences in school.

Jaylen

Jaylen is a 12-year-old sixth grader who lives with her mother. She is a shy girl who didn't readily make eye contact and seemed to have a speech delay although I could not find any documentation of a speech IEP (individualized education plan) in the exceptional children's program. Jaylen came for her interview neatly dressed in her uniform with khakis and a white polo shirt. She had on white tennis shoes and presented as if she is very unsure of herself.

Jaylen's parents are divorced. Her mother has more than a master's degree of education and is employed at a large university in the city. Her father completed high school and works in a blue-collar field. Jaylen's demographic sheet in her cumulative record stated that Spanish is read and translated by her mother, but she is listed as Black. She has no siblings in her home but has a nineteen-year old brother. She also mentioned her grandmother, grandfather, nieces, and god cousins and shared that family is very

important to her. Jaylen attended one traditional public school prior to enrolling at Success Academy for her middle school years.

Carmen and Rachel

Carmen is a 13-year-old eighth grader who was adopted by her sister. She presented as very animated and anxious. She wore her hair in long braids and wore her uniform of khaki pants and a black polo with a black puffy jacket. She also had on black tennis shoes with fat laces. She presented as very honest about her thoughts and didn't mince words when expressing herself. She was always cognizant of the time and frequently asked me how long she would be there and even requested not to go until a certain time to avoid a particular class.

Carmen presented as very street smart and from her responses, I could tell that she has had some rough life experiences. Carmen has an IEP (individualized education plan) in the exceptional children's program and continues to receive individualized attention to support her academic and behavior needs. Her sister, Rachel states, "She can't be in the regular classroom the whole time," and further elaborated that Carmen receives 1:1 resource help where she is pulled out of the regular education classroom and receives additional support to meet her IEP goals.

Rachel is Carmen's biological sister and is six years older than Carmen. She reports that she was 22 when she adopted Carmen and her brother, when Carmen was in the third grade. Rachel is in college for early childhood development and currently works at a fast food restaurant. Carmen is the youngest of two sisters and four brothers. She admitted to having been suspended from school for fighting and has attended five

traditional public elementary schools and two traditional public middle schools prior to enrolling at Success Academy. Rachel elaborates,

From the past she start going to different schools because of me and my living arrangements because I took on my little sister and brother to make sure they had the right living arrangements. They have been moved around and when Carmen went to NE Middle school it was like a steady thing with her. She was off balance and off focus because of how people think about her.

Carmen and Rachel spoke their minds and were very matter of fact when they answered questions about Carmen's school experiences. Rachel also agreed to be interviewed for the study.

Heaven and Jane

Heaven is an 11-year-old, sixth-grade, Black female who lives with her mother. Her parents are single but she spends time with her dad. She has three sisters and one brother. Two of her sisters also attend Success Academy. Heaven attended three North Carolina traditional public schools and an out of state traditional public school as well before transferring to Success Academy.

Heaven's mother, Jane, obtained some college education and works at a discount store while her father received his two-year college degree and works for a large, well known hotel chain. Jane is a single mom and the mother of five. She graduated from high school and achieved some college. She has three of her children enrolled at Success Academy and two that are not. One of her sons is in daycare and not old enough for school. Jane states, "Her [Heaven's] transition was a complete turnaround for her. In public school she was a class clown, couldn't stay focused and at Success she was a

leader and became more focused. That stuff came to a halt at Success.” Jane states Heaven is much more focused on her grades and academics now that she has been at Success Academy.

Heaven has beautifully styled hair. Each time I see her she appears to have just stepped out of a hair salon. She was shy and quiet but readily shared her thoughts about her educational experiences. She arrived for her interview very neatly dressed in khakis and a white polo shirt. She was wearing white tennis shoes and presented very timidly throughout the interview but still shared her thoughts and ambitions about her future goals. Heaven presented as an all American girl with a bright future. Heaven’s mother also agreed to participate in the research study and readily shared her thoughts about Heaven’s educational experiences in the previous traditional public schools she attended and her experiences at Success Academy.

Bianca

Bianca is a 12-year-old seventh grader who lives with both of her parents. Her mother has achieved a master’s degree or above educationally and her father has achieved his bachelor’s degree. Bianca’s mom is a professor at a large local public university and her dad worked for a large metropolitan public school district before coming to work at Success Academy. Bianca has three brothers, two older brothers and one younger brother that all attend traditional public schools.

Bianca attended a Montessori public school prior to enrolling at Success Academy. She is involved with Sarah in the extracurricular club that involves leadership for young ladies. She is also involved in an extracurricular club that supports seniors in

the community. She presented as a shy young lady but self reported that she could also be wild. She plays basketball and volleyball, is very tall and athletic and came to her interview dressed for game day. She was dressed in black dress pants and a nice sweater with dress shoes. She is one of the least talkative or introverted students in the study but still communicated her thoughts and opinions about school with a little prodding from the researcher.

Darkwing and Karen

Darkwing is a 12-year-old seventh grader and the only one of the student participants who chose her own pseudonym. She presented as very mature for her age and used her facial expressions to express her pleasure or displeasure with things. When interviewing Darkwing, it was like talking to an adult. Darkwing presented at the interview neatly dressed in khakis and a black polo shirt. She had on black tennis shoes, a black zippered jacket, and had her hair in braids.

Darkwing lives with her mother. She has a much older half sister by her father and had a brother that was shot and killed at the age of 15. Her parents are older than most of the other participants' parents. Darkwing's mother, Karen, is 53 and her dad is 63. Karen reported having a degree in speech pathology, Spanish and music but works in real estate. Darkwing has a relationship with her father and found it important to note that while her father doesn't pay child support he helps out with clothes and everything she needs. Karen states she was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, and that her parents, Darkwing's grandparents, were an educator and a career Navy man. Karen further expounds, "Getting an education was not an option; being well disciplined and behaved

was not an option. I have a very structured environment and it is difficult when she [Darkwing] comes from school from one environment [traditional public schools] to my home environment, which is very different.”

Darkwing attended two traditional public elementary schools before enrolling at Success Academy. Last school year she enrolled at a different charter middle school but had a negative experience and came back to Success Academy. She had some definitive and strong opinions about her educational experiences. Her mother did as well and was interviewed for the study also.

Joshua and Mary

Joshua is a subdued twelve-year old seventh grader who acted as if he did not to want to be present for his interview. He presented as one who had a lot of energy. He played with his pencil and eraser throughout the interview using the erasers to write on the desk and immediately wipe it off. He rarely made eye contact with me but used good manners, saying ‘yes, ma’am.’ Joshua presented as a student with concerns for attention and focus and upon review of his cumulative record it was noted that he is diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and behavioral issues. When Joshua was in first grade he became a runner. He would run out of the classroom and out of the building with or without provocation. His mother, Mary, shared how dangerous she thought this was and that the traditional public school he used to attend allowed him to run but would call her when he ran out of the building. She also shared that he had an IEP (individualized education plan) in the exceptional children’s program at the elementary school but they decided to “let the IEP go at the middle school.”

Joshua came to his interview and laid his head down on the desk. He was dressed in khaki colored corduroy pants and a black button up shirt. He also had a big puffy black jacket on and played with the zipper throughout the interview. In spite of the fact that Joshua appeared to be distracted, he answered every question, sometimes repeating himself but I could not tell for sure if he was passionate about his responses and thereby repeated them or if he didn't have more to add to what he'd already shared, thereby repeating responses to fill the time. During the focus group session, Joshua was a different person altogether. He seemed to want to get everyone's attention, was very sarcastic and disruptive. He eventually had to be excused from the focus group session so everyone else could participate.

Joshua lives with his mother and made no mention of a relationship with his father, nor did his mother, Mary. Mary achieved her two-year associate's degree from college and is an intern at a traditional public school. She is now in school working on her bachelor's degree. Mary is the single mother of four and reports she is a 37-year-old family oriented, loving, spiritual, and adventurous person. Mary had some very intense memories of Joshua's time in traditional public schools. Her recollection of these memories is palpable. Joshua has three sisters and one big brother. He noted that one of his sisters is a half-sister. Joshua attended two traditional public elementary schools and a magnet elementary school before attending Success Academy and felt strongly about his educational experiences before and after coming to Success.

Summary of Student and Parent Descriptions

The previous section provided a description of the background of the nine student participants and five parent participants interviewed as part of this research study. The students also participated in a focus group session in which they discussed the similarities and differences in their educational experiences. This group was a very diverse group of students composed of males and females with a variety of past school experiences, home lives, family composition, and socioeconomic statuses. From all of my interactions with the students and from the data collected including the parent data, my assumption is that six out of the nine students—Jaylen, Heaven, Carmen, Darkwing, Bianca, and Joshua—would likely qualify for free and reduced lunch according to the FNS requirements.

Each of the nine parent participants was recruited for the research study to gain more depth and breadth into all nine of the student participants' lived educational experiences. Only six agreed to participate. Due to unresolved scheduling conflicts with one of the parents, I interviewed five of the students' parents by phone and took verbatim anecdotal notes of the phone interviews for coding. The parents in this research study were all mothers, with the exception of Rachel, who is Carmen's sister but legal guardian. Only one of the parent participants [Louise] lived with her spouse. All of the other mothers were single moms and were introduced during the description of the students presented earlier in this chapter. The next section provides information regarding the background description of the teacher participants. The remaining sections provide a more detailed description of the teacher participants, the data collection methods employed, and the summary of research goals.

Background Description of Teacher Participants

Three of the eight teachers surveyed at Success Academy chose to participate in the research study and completed a Google form questionnaire that I sent to them via email. This section provides a more descriptive analysis of a few of the teachers that influence the educational experiences of the student participants at Success Academy. Because their perceptions of the student participants' educational experiences are also sought, it is important to better know and understand the teachers themselves and their backgrounds from their own self-report. We begin the teacher background data with Rebecca.

Rebecca

Rebecca is an Asian American teacher with 15 years of experience in traditional public schools and eight years of experience in charter schools. When asked about her personal experiences as a student in school, she states, "I loved going to school and enjoyed learning. My favorite subject as a student was math. I had a great math teacher who made learning fun." When asked why she became a teacher she states, "My dad was an assistant principal and was my biggest inspiration. I guess I followed in his footsteps and don't regret it." When asked why she decided to pursue a job at a charter school and how it has impacted her career, she replies, "I enjoy teaching in a small school setting. I have a great principal who is always supporting us in our educational endeavors." Rebecca was very opinionated about her thoughts on Success Academy, her classroom, and her students. Her viewpoints were very important to the research study as they added an additional perspective to be uncovered in the data analysis.

Ramona

Ramona is a European American/White teacher with 11 years of experience in traditional public schools and three years of experience teaching in charter schools.

Ramona shares,

I liked going to school and did well in school. I went to a small Catholic school from kindergarten through eighth grade, then to a public high school. I cheered, played basketball, and softball. I was in the honor society and the yearbook.

Ramona was asked about why she became a teacher and she states, “I became a teacher because ever since I could remember that is what I wanted to do. I enjoy planning and I like children. I am patient and truly enjoy getting the best out of students.” Ramona had a lengthy response about why she chose to pursue a career at the charter school. She explains,

I chose to come to a charter school because a former principal I had worked with in the public schools was interested in me teaching at her school. I wanted a change from the public school setting and all the demands that seemed to be out on teachers without any kind of compensation. I was also curious about the charter school world and how it was different and the same.

Ramona acknowledged that when she made the move to Success Academy it was like she remembered her first years in traditional public schools, with more teacher control over what she taught and the freedom to do what she thought was best for her students.

Despite these positive qualities, she also revealed a negative one about her charter school experience. She acknowledges, “I have come to see that a charter school does have its

downfalls as well. Pay is low and there is not much oversight in how it is managed which can be good or bad.”

Paul

Paul is the only male teacher who responded to the recruitment efforts for this research study. Paul is European American/White and has two years of traditional public school experience and one year of charter school experience. When asked about his experiences as a student in school, he states, “I was a fairly good student, though certainly not at the head of my class. In high school I took some AP classes, and always took honors.” Paul shares that he became a teacher because, “I have always really enjoyed history, politics and current events. In high school I also became very interested in social justice. Since my mother and sister are teachers, going into teaching seemed like a way to combine these things.” Furthermore, Paul was asked why he chose to teacher at a charter school and he reports,

My time in public school was very stressful and discouraging, particularly because of how large my school was. I really thought that the smaller setting of this particular charter school would be easier for me to handle and would have more impact on students.

Paul is a beginning teacher, which means he has less than 4 years of experience teaching in North Carolina. According to his story, he had a very challenging experience in traditional public schools and sought the smaller setting at Success Academy to help him fulfill his commitment to teach. Because of his short tenure in education, however, it is no surprise his perspectives are slightly different from the more veteran teacher

participants. The subsequent section will provide background information about the leader of Success Academy, Principal Clark.

Principal Clark

Mrs. Clark serves as the dual role of principal and director of Success Academy. She serves both the K–2 and the 3–8 campuses but her main office is in the middle school building. Mrs. Clark is a Black female that appears to be in her late thirties or early forties. She is married and a mother of three school aged children. She has both her master's and specialist in education degrees and is currently pursuing her doctor of education degree from a reputable public university. Obviously education is highly valued to Mrs. Clark and she is leading Success Academy by example of being a lifelong learner.

Mrs. Clark is a no-nonsense type of principal. She seems to run a tight ship and everyone seems to know the expectations for behavior and for the most part of what I observed, follows them. The school atmosphere is very welcoming and staff and students alike appear happy and were many times smiling. Parents were in and out of the school and the principal was visible in the school setting. I observed very few disciplinary situations but when I did observe Mrs. Clark talking with a student to correct behavior, she did so in a kind, nurturing, and caring manner. She exhibited good rapport with students, staff, and parents. She also ran the charter school advisory board meetings, which are the governing board of Success Academy. This means not only did Mrs. Clark have to know how to run the school, but also she was also responsible for the oversight and total management of the school and instructional program.

Summary of Teacher Participant and Principal Descriptions

The three teacher participants that chose to participate in the research study had to make a commitment to complete a Google form questionnaire that was estimated to take them at least an hour to complete. While Rebecca and Paul both completed the surveys during the regular school day, Ramona completed the questionnaire after school hours, specifically at 9:29 pm according to the time stamp. The fact that the teachers participated at all is a sign of commitment to education because they certainly didn't have to take the time to do this with all of the responsibilities they have as a teacher. However, from their own self-report, the teacher participants enjoyed school and were relatively good students. I suspect these factors were influential on their decision to become a teacher even though they didn't mention them as factors. Additionally, their enjoyment of education likely caused them to want to participate in the research study.

All of the teachers are of other ethnicities than the student participants. This is particularly interesting because the majority of teachers and the principal of Success Academy are Black. Despite this difference in ethnicity, the teachers self-reported they are doing the best they can to meet the needs of the students they serve. Additionally, it is noteworthy that Mrs. Clark did not complete the Google form questionnaire, nor was she a participant in the research study. Mrs. Clark did, however, assist the researcher by establishing a student participant pool. Moreover, she was extremely welcoming and accommodating to me on the numerous visits to Success Academy. Subsequently, I included Mrs. Clark's descriptive information because it will add to the richness of the data analysis to have the background on Mrs. Clark. Appendix G provides a summary of

background information about the teacher participants including their teaching experiences, why they became a teacher, and why they left traditional public schools to teach at Success Academy.

Student Interview Process

The student interview process was described in detail in Chapter III and was extremely valuable to gain a deeper understanding of the student participants and their backgrounds including the silences and slippages that typically occur as a result of qualitative research and are evident in the narratives of research participants as they told their stories in their own words with their own priorities and purposes. Reissman (1993) acknowledges that as researchers we endeavor to not give voice to participants' stories, but to record and interpret the voices heard during interviews (p. 8). This process of recording and interpreting the voices of the student participants was a very worthwhile experience. Their perspectives and educational experiences were all different and contributed greatly to this study.

Parent Interview Process

It was deemed important when considering the magnitude of the case study to include the perspectives of the students' parents. The decision to move from a traditional public school to a charter school was not a decision the students made by themselves. The parents were actively involved in the decision to transfer from traditional public schools to Success Academy, thus their thoughts and input on their student's educational experiences added a dimension to the data that would serve the research study well.

Table 3 represents the parent interview pool. Appendix E, the Parent Telephone Interview Questionnaire, was used to interview the parents who agreed to participate.

Table 3

Parent Participant Descriptions

Pseudonym	Student	Race	Gender	From	Marital Status	Other Children
Karen	Darkwing	Black	Female	Illinois	Divorced	0
Louise	Mo	Black	Female	North Carolina	Married	1 older
Mary	Joshua	Black	Female	North Carolina	Single	1 older and 1 younger
Rachel (Sister who adopted Carmen)	Carmen	Black	Female	North Carolina	Single	0 but adopted Carmen and her brother
Jane	Heaven	Black	Female	North Carolina	Single	4 younger

Note. Table 3 provides background information about the parent participants.

Table 4

Categories of Focus Cited by Research Study Participants

Categories of Focus	Mentioned by Whom
Perceptions About Schools	Carmen, Darkwing, Heaven, Mo, and Sarah
Stress in Schools	Karen, Paul, and Ramona
High Quality Teaching & Learning	Bianca, Carmen, Darkwing, Jacob, Jaylen, Joshua, Mo, RJ, Sarah, Paul, Rachel, Ramona, and Rebecca

Table 4

(Cont.)

Categories of Focus	Mentioned by Whom
Student Performance	Jane, Karen, Louise, Mary, Paul, Principal Clark, Rachel, and Ramona
Class Size	Bianca, Carmen, Darkwing, Mo, Sarah, Louise, Mary, Paul, Rachel, Ramona, and Rebecca
Relationships	Carmen, Darkwing, Heaven, Jaylen, Mo, Sarah, Louise, Mary, Rachel, Ramona, and Rebecca
Principal Behaviors	Darkwing, RJ and Sarah
Bullying	Carmen, Darkwing, Heaven, Joshua, Mo, RJ, Sarah, and Jane
Parent and Teacher Interactions	Karen, Mary, Paul, Rachel, Ramona, and Rebecca
Transitioning Between Students	Darkwing, Heaven, Joshua, RJ, and Sarah, and Karen
Race	Darkwing, Paul, Ramona, and Rebecca

Note. Table 4 depicts recurring categories of focus cited by research participants.

Teacher Questionnaire Process

Teacher surveys were conducted to add additional depth to the data collection. It was an important as part of this research study to gain as much information from multiple sources to have as complete an understanding of the student participants' educational experiences as possible. Because teachers have direct influence over the students' educational experiences, their input was invaluable to the data collection and analysis in addition to some of the students' mothers.

Chapter IV provided the detailed background description of the research study participants. The background descriptions provide insight into the participants' stories because it reveals the lenses they have used throughout their lived experiences and how these lenses affect their perceptions about their school experiences. The parent participants chose to participate in the research study and demonstrated an investment in the value of this work and the value of their children's education. They also approved for their students to participate and the students did so after the process was explained to them. They didn't have to agree to participate but their agreement also supports their commitment to their education and their ability to reflect on what is important to them regarding their educational experiences. Getting middle school students to open up about school is not a simple task, so the sharing of these students' lives in such a transparent way is both significant and very powerful.

The teacher participants in this study all left traditional public schools and transferred to Success Academy for a variety of reasons. They willingly chose to complete a lengthy Google form questionnaire in which they were asked to reflect upon their teaching experiences and how these experiences have shaped their work with the student participants and their families. The interpretations of these responses enhance the overall understanding of the students' educational experiences at Success Academy.

CHAPTER V

DATA ANALYSIS: SCHOOLING, LEARNING, AND THEIR IMPORTANCE TO STUDENTS

This chapter presents the data from a qualitative case study about the student participants and their educational experiences in a small urban charter school. Furthermore, this chapter examines the lived experiences of students by analyzing recurring codes in the data sets that emerged into eleven categories of focus (see Figure 4). After a second analysis, those eleven categories of focus were then merged into four themes introduced in Chapter III (see Figure 5). Two of the four themes will be discussed in this chapter—the purpose of schools and the understood value of education (see Figure 6).

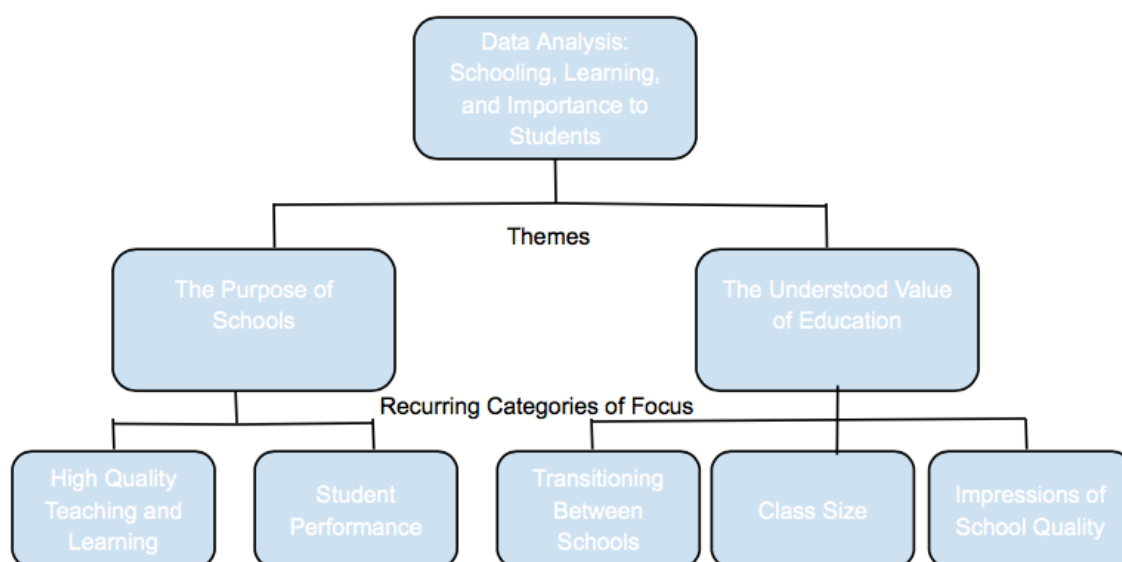


Figure 6. Data Analysis: Schooling, Learning, and Importance to Students.

The goal of this research study was to co-construct meaning by presenting the stories of the case study participants in their own words with the integration of the conceptual framework and CRT as lenses for focus while revealing silences or slippages that surfaced. In an attempt to learn from the research participants, their narratives revealed much about their lives and what factors positively or negatively impact the educational experiences of the student participants. Moreover, the instructional, organizational, social, and cultural attributes that caused the student participants' to be invested in their education is embedded.

The importance of teaching and learning was an important recurring topic within the data. Preparation for high school and beyond was significant to the student participants and their ability to be successful in the future. Therefore, perceptions about how high quality teaching and learning impacts the student participants' educational experiences are discussed in the following subsection.

High Quality Teaching and Learning

Researchers posit nothing impacts student achievement more than quality teaching and learning (Carter & Welner, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Moe & Chubb, 2009; Schmoker, 2006). The decision to leave the traditional public schools the student participants previously attended was not by chance, but the student participants in this case study made informed decisions based on their impressions about the quality of the educational opportunities available to them. As a result, they selected Success Academy as a way to a better education. Therefore, participants' thoughts about high quality

teaching and learning and its impact on the student participants' educational experiences is invaluable.

One could argue that the most important function of schools is to teach the written, taught, and tested curriculum. The written curriculum is a combination of materials and resources used by teachers as a guide for what's expected to be taught in the classroom. The taught curriculum is what actually happens in the classroom; what teachers actually teach and the tested curriculum is set in the formative and summative assessments that are conducted to ensure students have learned the curriculum taught (Glatthorn, 1999). However, educators know that it is less about what is taught but more about what is learned. Without learning taking place, our best efforts to teach have failed to achieve the expected outcomes.

The student participants insistently talked about the teaching that occurs in school. They were very candid in their responses about what works and what doesn't. They also had very strong convictions about the learning experience at Success Academy and why and how they have positively contributed to their educational experiences.

Joshua was asked about the most important thing he remembered about his experiences at his former schools. He states, "Probably the information that they taught me." Joshua was not the only student who remembered or placed value on the information he was taught. Darkwing's reflection on one of the traditional public schools she attended in first grade was positive. She noted, "I would say their curriculum was good; what they were teaching." When reflecting on what was positive about his experiences at one of the traditional public schools he attended, Joshua noted, "I think I

had a pretty good experience. I could understand the work really well. It wasn't too complicated or farfetched." When referring to her experience at the other charter school she briefly transferred to, Darkwing reports, "There, I would say, my opinion, their curriculum is not for an African American student to succeed, honestly." But later Darkwing remembers some positives about the curriculum and acknowledges,

What was positive about [the other charter school] was that they taught things that public schools wouldn't teach, they taught about, at—well, for one thing, they taught about social studies and some public schools don't teach about social studies. We were learning Greek Mythology. They gave us a choice between Turkish or Spanish.

While the positives about what was taught at the other charter school were favorable, what was unfavorable to Darkwing was what happened when she needed help with that curriculum. She expounds,

And then [at one of her former traditional public schools], their teachers took the time to sit down with you and explain the things that you didn't understand like here [Success Academy]. They would take you aside and explain it to you. Then at [the other charter school] you would just have to say, well I don't understand and then everybody will be like well dang, you're slow or anything like that. Some students don't like to tell that they don't understand out loud. They want to go aside with the teacher and that's not what they allowed there.

Most people would think that helping students is a common practice but from the student participants' perspectives in this case study, this practice was not all that common.

Darkwing emphasized an interesting disparity that is often found between low poverty schools and high poverty schools. Darkwing mentioned that she was learning Greek Mythology and had an option to take Turkish or Spanish when enrolled at the

higher income charter school she left. Louise also recognizes the inequity that she observes and shares her dislike,

I don't like that they [Success Academy] don't have the resources and funding to provide the kids with encore classes, specials like music and all that. They don't have the space for them to spread out and expand and do what they need to do. Finances create some setbacks.

These options for foreign language and special encore classes are not available to the students at Success Academy like some wealthier schools. CRT theorists, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) write about how race and property applies to education. "In the simplest of equations, those with 'better' property are entitled to 'better' schools" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 53). In this case, property applies to the offerings available to a higher income school as opposed to the offerings available to student participants at Success Academy where there are more Black students and less resources to provide these options.

Jaylen only attended one traditional public school with a concentration on STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) before transferring to Success Academy. One experience that stood out in her mind was her fourth grade year. She shares,

They kept switching the teachers. And they didn't teach that very good—they didn't teach very well. Like when I needed help with multiplication I didn't understand it but they—I told her [the teacher] I didn't understand it and she kept moving on to division, so I had to have a tutor to help me.

Furthermore, when Jaylen was asked about what she'd like to share with the principals and teachers at her former school to make things better she reflects, "When a person

doesn't get it to help them more for they can get it—so they can get it, I mean.” Heaven adds to the discussion about teaching and learning with her comments on teaching at Success Academy,

Well, the teachers are nice and they help us do our work and stuff. . . . They kind of teach you more stuff here [Success Academy]. . . . I try and I put every effort in it and then I ask questions of the teachers and they help me.

Again and again, “they help me” was a recurring topic in the data.

Bianca previously attended a Montessori school for grades PK through fifth grade and indicated what was positive about her experience at that school was, “thinking and learning.” To further emphasize she states, “Because the teachers help you a lot. To explain something if you didn't know it; they wouldn't just let you figure it out on your own, but sometimes they did independent work with you or something.” Bianca was asked to compare and contrast her former school with Success Academy. She explains,

They both have really good teachers. . . . Well at Montessori school you use—you learn different techniques and how to—you do like hands on; you use different materials to work out your problems, but here you don't use that—they teach you with the board or with paper and pencil.

Bianca conveyed that she preferred the Montessori experience due to the hands on activities and available materials to work with. From the time I spent at Success, I am certain the teachers do not have the materials and supplies Bianca had access to at the Montessori school. Bianca also admitted to being afraid to go to public school. This fear of public school is addressed later in Chapter IV.

Mo, who is Academically Gifted (AG) and previously attended five traditional public schools talked about the advanced teachers he got and how they helped him sharpen his math skills. When considering the most important thing he remembered about his experiences at his previous schools, Mo recalls,

Most important I think would be when I had advanced teachers. Starting in second grade for math, no actually I think it was first grade they took, they took—sent me to a second-grade class to go do math because of the math level I was on. And then I think in third grade was when I started having AG classes and I had good AG teachers. The best AG teacher I had was when I went to fifth grade and in middle school. I—the team that I was on, we had—we were the only team that had a math teacher that did advanced math, so we were the only sixth-grade, advanced math class in the school.

Mo went on to explain that he is one of six seventh-grade students taking advanced math at Success Academy. He takes Algebra classes and thinks the reason he is in these classes is “partially based on EOG scores.” Mo acts very nonchalant about his advanced coursework but it is obvious to me through his nonverbal cues that he is proud of himself and sees his advanced math class and his AIG status as a status symbol of sorts. However, Mo is attending Success Academy because of soccer, not academics.

RJ discussed his previous experience and frustration with teacher reviews and learning. While RJ didn’t say that the reviews were for EOGs, I extrapolated that the continuous reviews he referenced were in preparation for standardized tests. Far too often in too many classrooms and schools in America, teachers feel the pressure for their students to do well on standardized tests and the result is reviews, drill, and kill. RJ addresses these reviews,

From [previous traditional public middle school] it was just reviews and stuff, what I already knew from fifth grade. Sometimes I learned something new but it was mostly just review and even if they taught me new stuff I would forget. Yeah, if I was learning new stuff it didn't matter because I would learn quickly and just, I would just learn quickly and not need to go over it. I wouldn't need the reviews, but I had to do the reviews anyway. . . . I didn't want to listen to the reviews because I already know that. Why would I need to review it? And I can understand we need to review it so we can remember it later on in seventh grade, but just still, I don't, nobody wants to put up with reviews all the time. Everybody just wants to move on, get to a new subject.

RJ stated he doesn't have to do these perceived as unnecessary reviews at Success

Academy and elaborates further,

Well, they teach new stuff all the time. They review stuff but the difference between the reviews here [Success academy] is that they, the reviews here, they review stuff that they've taught us in seventh grade; no reviews of sixth, fifth, or fourth grade, none of that, just reviews in seventh grade.

Sarah too had an experience at her previous traditional public schools with unnecessary work that she perceived was an excuse not to teach. She articulates,

There's a thing that they have that's called busywork that they give the students which most of the time is just like, you know, little worksheets and packets that you do. Then they get a grade on it and that's pretty much it. They don't really do any real teaching.

Subsequently, Sarah disclosed how important teachers are. She notes, "I think they're [teachers] very important when it comes to education in any student's life because they're the ones that are, you know, teaching you the lesson or giving you the information that you need to pass." Clearly teachers matter to Sarah and indeed they do. Teachers matter most.

Student participants in this research study were focused on how important teaching is to them learning the necessary skills to move forward with their educational experiences. In contrast to the negative experiences Sarah and RJ disclosed regarding busywork and unnecessary reviews that wasted teaching time at traditional public schools, Joshua communicated his thoughts about the teaching at Success Academy. He conveys,

It's just their teaching set is just different. Not only do you explain everything you learned from previous grades better and easier, if you haven't understood they take time off of other topics to explain it to you and at least for two days they explain that topic, or one topic and then go back to what you've already learned without it being difficult for you to learn—one topic to another. . . . I still say that they explain it a lot better than any other teachers, they really take time to go into the topic and explain it a lot more before they ask you any questions to make sure that you completely understand it.

Conversely, Rachel compares and contrasts the traditional public schools Carmen attended with Success Academy,

The structure is different. I sat in both classrooms [at the traditional public school and Success Academy]. I went with my sister and a teacher was more engaged. When a teacher [at Success] asked a question when a child doesn't know, they would talk them through it and help them understand without giving them the answer. At [the traditional public school] they would just go on to the next child.

The teachers also shared their perceptions of what high quality teaching and learning looks like at Success Academy. Paul states the special or unique instructional features of his classes include a “focus on global affairs and African American history” as key to students’ success. Moreover, Rebecca cites, “All my students are engaged at all times. There is never a ‘dead’ moment in my class. I make learning fun and exciting

with real hands on manipulatives, music and videos.” Furthermore, Ramona expounds, “For the most part, my students want to do well and try their hardest once I give them the strategies and techniques that will help them do this.” Providing students with tips and tools for success was one of the recurring codes from students as a teacher behavior that was both beneficial and commonplace at Success Academy. Teachers also cited after school tutoring and Saturday academy as instructional keys to student success. Ironically, neither students nor their parents mentioned these instructional strategies. One might wonder if the student participants know about these opportunities for additional instructional support, take advantage of them, or consider them unimportant or unnecessary. However, these are opportunities that might improve student performance over time.

This section addressed perceptions about teaching and learning from the students’, parents’, and teachers’ perspectives. A full discussion on what works and what doesn’t work in school, including busywork, endless reviews, and teachers being willing to help students who struggle was included. Additionally, Darkwing introduced a discussion about the disparity in resources and course offerings between Success Academy and a low poverty school.

In summary, student participants had no misgivings with the educational experiences at their traditional public schools with regards to course offerings and for the most part they felt their teachers were good instructionally. They didn’t think they had enough teacher support due to large class sizes, nor did they like busywork and reviews that they thought were irrelevant. At Success Academy, they think the teachers are nice

and spend more time helping them learn the content effectively but they lack the resources they had in traditional public schools to solve problems like Bianca expressed in the Montessori school she previously attended. Therefore, there were instructional elements of high quality teaching and learning that the student participants liked and found beneficial in both public school settings. Subsequently, teachers disclosed remedial opportunities for students to get extra help at Success Academy that neither the students nor their parents mentioned. The next section will address student performance and the relationship between student grades and EOG scores. Moreover, an in-depth look at student performance reveals interesting dichotomies between students and parents think they are performing and where the data indicates they are performing.

Student Performance

Teachers have a huge responsibility to ensure their students' success. In fact, teaching to ensure students are learning is one of the most important functions of schools. Black students who enter the classroom without adequate academic preparation need instructional strategies and scaffolds to help them have a lifeline and something they can do to help themselves be successful. In spite of the instructional strategies mentioned in the previous section on high quality teaching and learning, however, Paul states that his students aren't performing well on the EOGs. The North Carolina State Report Card disclosed in Chapter III verifies this acknowledgement.

Although EOGs are not the only factor in determining a students' success or failure, they are the predominant measure of student, school, and teacher success in North Carolina. The instructional strategies of teachers are important but the most important

thing is student learning. Without learning taking place, effective teaching is not happening. Whether students, parents, or teachers measure learning, the state of North Carolina measures student gains and progress on standardized assessments. A focus on these standardized tests was another silence noted in the student and parent stories.

The student participants' academic changes and progress over time as measured by their grades and EOG levels are presented in Appendix C. Unfortunately, most of the student participants in this case study had academic stagnation. Most of the students who have not made academic gains as presented by Appendix C came to Success Academy behind on their EOGs and had ground to make up. However, in order to continue to grow to decrease the discrepancy from where a student enters a grade and when they leave the grade, the expectation is that the student will at least make progress in a year's time. A reasonable expectation is that a student in an average classroom should make progress for a year's worth of seat time. However, when students are behind, they need to make a lot more progress in a year. If not, the gulf between where the student is performing and where they should be performing continues to widen. When students are not growing or progressing over time, they are getting further and further behind creating a chasm between where they are and where they should be that may be impossible to overcome.

Students and parents reported that the student participants were doing well academically. Rachel states,

She [Carmen] is strong-minded and they helped her with her self-esteem. They helped her with her reading but she had things with puberty going on. They

helped her grades. Her grades are much better since they [Success Academy teachers] have been working with her and giving her 1:1 and accommodating her.

Likewise, Mary concurs,

I feel like there is a high academic standard there [Success Academy]. His [Joshua's] motivation and his excitement to learn is the reason for his improved grades. He likes different ways of being taught rather than worksheets and lecture. He is not a lecture and worksheet type of kid.

Karen also expresses how Darkwing has improved her focus on grades since attending Success Academy.

Her [Darkwing's] dad thinks I push her too hard because I don't want her thinking being mediocre is all right. I don't want her to think that just getting by is enough. I want her to think that being at the top of the level is where you should be and go down fighting to be at the top level. I told her a B is a want to be A. I told her to bring me a straight A report card. She did that. She realized her potential to do that. She may not have all As but they are mostly As and very few Bs. Perfect 4.0 graduating from fifth grade. I couldn't ask for anything better. Now she pushes herself.

Furthermore, when asked about Heaven's academic performance at her previous traditional public schools as compared to Success Academy, Jane reports,

[Heaven was an] A/B honor roll student. She was lacking a little bit in math and at Success Academy she was lacking a little in Spanish but she brought those grades up. She had F in Spanish and D in math but she has brought that up.

All of the parent participants reported their students grade were better since attending Success Academy with the exception of Louise, Mo's mother. She reported Mo's grades were fine and were "All As and Bs" at the traditional public schools he attended and that

his grades are still “All As and Bs” at Success Academy. Appendix C illustrates the student academic records review the researcher conducted of the student participants’ cumulative records. The records review confirms Louise’s report on Mo as he has had no change in the past four years on English Language Arts (ELA) or math. Appendix C also confirms Rachel’s saying Carmen has improved her grades. Carmen improved one letter grade in reading and math over the past four years.

Despite the self-report of the other four mothers that their children’s grades have improved, Appendix C indicates a slight contrast to their parents’ reports—Darkwing has had no change in ELA or math over the past four years. Heaven has had no change in ELA but improved one letter grade in math and Joshua improved one letter grade in ELA but has had no change in math over the past four years. Unfortunately the student participants’ EOG scores have not improved to correspond with their grades.

Appendix C illustrates the net change in reading and math EOG levels over all prior years. The student academic records indicated that only two of the nine student participants with available test data—Bianca and Darkwing—were proficient on the NC EOG in reading and none of the students were proficient on the NC EOG in math. Furthermore, most students—five of the nine students, had seen no change in their academic performance or had seen a decline in their academic performance over all years with regard to grades. There appears to be no direct correlation between those students I suspected as having qualified for free and reduced lunch and those who I did not suspect. I did not suspect that Mo, RJ, or Sarah would have qualified for free and reduced lunch but they too had no change or decline in letter grades, wherein Jaylen, Carmen, and

Heaven actually had some improvement in grades. Subsequently, the NC Report Cards revealed that over time, Success Academy students have failed to improve their overall EOG scores.

The students acknowledged that they preferred the school settings of their former traditional public schools due to having more resources. However, the students preferred the teachers at Success Academy because in their opinion, the teachers ensured they learned the content taught. Inversely, there is disconnect between the student's academic performance as measured by state standardized tests, and actual student perception of mastery of content. This disconnect could be attributed to the age and developmental level of students and their inability to fully comprehend what EOG measures indicate regarding mastery of content in contrast to grades that may include modifications for students if they are not on grade level. The student participants at Success Academy are disadvantaged because they came to Success Academy behind and have remained behind academically. Additionally, the students' ability to catch up to their age level peers of higher income and low poverty schools may determine their ability to succeed in high school and beyond.

When the researcher inquired as to why some students' scores were not in their cumulative folder, the researcher was told that Success Academy has a difficult time getting cumulative record data from the sending traditional public schools. The relationships between this charter school and the traditional public schools the student participants left that would support reciprocity of information does not always function properly and thus, many students' cumulative records are incomplete. This is an

unfortunate practice because the students are the ones that may potentially suffer. Cumulative records house vast amounts of student data that help educators make informed decisions about how best to support them. Not having access to that information is detrimental to student progress.

The EOG results discussed are startling. The discrepancy between parent participant and student self-reports of improved grades was not always the case in reality. This slippage was noted because the data reveals a different picture from the parent, student, and teacher perceptions about the student participants' academic performance. While the data doesn't lie, student and parent perceptions of academic progress and student success may not be directly tied to end of grade test results that some feel are arbitrary measures of student performance. Based upon the narratives, parents placed more emphasis on grades as measures of academic achievement or academic success and positive educational experiences. Subsequently, Louise illuminates her insight into the focus on EOGs or lack thereof. She states,

With Success Academy the teachers come from a different mold. Their outlook and attitude about education are their own and not based on the state test. They do the standardized testing but they get to teach their passion and not through the common core. Like Principal Clark said, they are doing common core but not like public schools so they have more freedom and are not as stressed as public schools.

Perhaps this is the reason only one of the teachers, Paul, mentioned EOGs and the fact that his students aren't doing well on them. This belief is further reinforced by one teacher, Ramona's discussion of her dislike of instructional micromanagement that she experienced in traditional public schools. She writes,

I enjoyed my experience in traditional public schools up until the last few years I taught there. When I began teaching in 2001 I felt I was respected as a professional and was able to make decisions about teaching that I felt were best for my students. I've had success in this way and had several students, if not all passing EOGs and feeling good about their schooling. When I left, I felt I was being micromanaged by people whom had never taught in schools similar to the one I was in. I was told how I should do everything, demanded to attend Saturday trainings with the rest of the staff and even more. It became much less enjoyable as the years went on.

Ramona's reflection on micromanagement and Louise's comment in regards to teachers having more freedom and not feeling stressed may be the catalyst for why the school's EOG scores aren't better.

The fact that student participants in this study nor their parents question this data is not surprising if student grades are satisfactory but socially responsible schools, while uncomfortable, should begin the discussion and self-reflection necessary in order to uncover the root of the problem. I think it stems from a lack of a sense of urgency and teachers being empowered to make their own instructional decisions without accountability. When asked how students' socioeconomic status influenced experiences as a teacher and/or influenced teaching, Paul writes, "I have changed my curriculum to accommodate their needs." This means that the curriculum may be watered down to meet the needs of students who according to Paul have, "Parents who have not gone to college and do not read well have often not encouraged their children to read."

The deficit thinking here contributes to lowered expectations and likely results in negative student performance. "Obviously, students will not learn to higher levels unless they experience good teaching, a strong curriculum and adequate resources" (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. 258). Furthermore, Cooper et al. (2010) postulate, "educators who

hold deficit-based views of diversity and difference tend to discount how much families know and care about their children, which diminishes educators' trust in parents and parents' trust in educators" (p. 762).

Teachers who feel the freedom to make their own academic decisions without the stress of the test may not be concerned when the test scores come back and student progress is low. However, disadvantaged Black students and their communities are depending on their preparation for college and careers to be effective and engaged citizens and cannot afford substandard instruction. Therefore, to ignore this dilemma is in my opinion equivalent to malpractice and a conversation or investigation that simply cannot wait.

Principal Clark was very concerned about the letter grade assigned to Success Academy through the new NC READY Accountability model complete with a school letter grade distinction of a D. However, a strategic attack on ways to address this concern over student achievement is warranted and needed. Moreover, Principal Clark cannot do it alone. The type of whole school reform efforts needed to ensure all students are making academic progress will require input and examination from administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community leaders.

Apathetic stakeholders are problematic due to a lack of involvement and support for education reform efforts. A lack of interest may perpetuate the lack of academic gains for disadvantaged students and the schools that are charged with educating them. Therefore, a concerted effort to rally a sense of urgency for student performance and interest in academic achievement and strategies to increase student performance not only

on standardized summative assessments, but on daily formative assessments would be beneficial for the Success Academy school community. Parents, students, and teachers should be concerned at the lack of overall progress on EOGs over an extended amount of time and begin to question why.

At the beginning of this subsection on student performance it was acknowledged that teaching and learning is one of the most fundamental responsibilities of schools. Schmoker (2006) states, “. . . our current results have to be a reflection of a school culture, that in too many cases, has an alarming tolerance for mediocre instruction, worksheets, and busywork—at the expense of effective, intellectually viable reading, writing, and learning activities” (p. 22). To equip students with the knowledge and skill set to be successful is a critical element of any school and is a measure of school success as indicated by standardized testing. Parents, community stakeholders, and business leaders expect schools to develop a highly skilled workforce to attract business and industry so attention to the written, taught, and tested curriculum is vital.

All of the focus on schooling and the demand for better skilled students prepared to enter colleges or the workforce has been an emphasis. However, a dearth of focus has been on students and the importance they place on teaching and learning and how they see it as a linchpin to their future success and how their performance on standardized tests may prohibit options in the future.

The student participants’ concern about learning and about getting a good education is not unique to them. This is a concern for many students and not just the wealthy or students who come from more affluent means. High quality teaching and

learning is an expectation of students and a necessity that should not be overlooked.

Anyone invested in the future of America must be concerned about education. In order to prepare a highly skilled workforce to move our country into the 21st century, we must question education as we know it and figure out ways to make educational achievement a right and promise for all Americans.

Historically, schooling in the U.S. involved teachers as the imparters of knowledge and students as sponges soaking that knowledge up. Today, education generally consists of students spending a pre-determined amount of time in a classroom with an established group of peers and a teacher, who if lucky provides an opportunity for the student to learn the established curriculum, to explore, grow, and develop academically, socially, physically, and emotionally. Despite this stark reality, today's students also need to respect themselves and others, and to become prepared for global competitiveness through an understanding of self and relations with others.

Re-segregated schools, under the guise of school choice, stifle students' abilities to grapple with differences and to work productively with other students who don't look just like them. Furthermore, if we agree with Perrone (1991) that children are the future we must prepare them for the world they will enter—a world plagued by poverty, racial tension, religious conflicts, environmental concerns, a global economy, war, and disease. These problems will not be resolved by students' ability to solve multiple-choice questions on a high stakes test. However, their performance on these tests may hold the key to other opportunities that can enable them to move successfully into their future endeavors. In order to prepare students to become productive citizens, problem solvers,

conservationists, and supports of democracy and social justice, our society must commit to educating all students to be prepared for college and careers. To address the academic concerns at Success Academy will require courage and vision for improving academic performance, but all stakeholders working together could create a better educational experience resulting in increased academic achievement for the disadvantaged students who attend this charter middle school. The next section will examine transitioning between students and how practices designed to transition students well can influence students' educational experiences.

Transitioning between Schools

All of the student participants had an adjustment from traditional public schools to Success Academy. Not only did they leave traditional public schools but many of the students attended several schools prior to and after they enrolled at Success Academy. I refer back to Table 2 that reflected the number of traditional public schools the student participants had previously attended prior to Success Academy. When discussing transition to new schools, Pipher (2002) asserts, "Schools may be overwhelming at first, but it is school that will enable children to make it in America. Schools offer students the freedom to develop and to dream big American dreams" (p. 114). For disadvantaged Black middle school students, this is a critical factor in the development and fruition of future goals and dreams. When asked what if anything she'd like to share with the principals or teachers at Darkwing's previous schools to make them better, her mother Karen, advises, "Be a teacher and not a politician, not a negotiator. When these children grow up and get out in the real world they will not have the option to negotiate between

working at McDonalds or being a CEO.” Karen clearly knows and values the importance of schools and their role in creating opportunities for all students.

When students are transitioning to a new school environment it is especially important that the instructional attributes of school be structured to support students and help them be successful with whatever they plan to do in the future. Joshua, a student who attended two traditional public schools and one magnet school talked specifically about his decision to transfer to Success Academy. He shared,

Well, she [his mom] told me about the school and I thought it was probably—I wanted to try it because well, I’d never been to this school before and I thought it’d probably be a new start. I heard good things about it like it was good for students; the teaching mechanisms were pretty good.

Joshua also had some thoughts about what the most important factor was in his decision to transfer to Success Academy, “I think how was the school good for me? Kinda like what are some of the benefits I can get from the school?” Additionally, RJ, who attended three traditional public schools before Success disclosed that the most important thing he remembered about his experiences at previous schools includes,

That I got a good education, a higher education, and more needed necessity skills that I needed to learn when I get out of school. And if I don’t learn those then I, then I can’t get a job. I’ll become homeless, I’ll lose my money, I just can’t do anything, then I’ll just have to sit there and die, just—that’s it. Once you become homeless you can either be helped which is highly unlikely or you could just sit there and just get sick and stuff and soon you’ll be dead.

RJ was then asked a follow up question about why that memory was so important to him. He states, “Because when I can get married, I could have kids and then I could pass on

my knowledge to them.” Clearly RJ knows the consequences of not having the necessary skills to survive and is focused on his future. He wants his education to equip him with the skills he needs to accomplish his future goals.

Of course all of the students had different thoughts and views on school and what was important to them. Heaven, who attended four traditional public schools, one of them being out of state, comments, “This school goes to eighth grade so maybe we can stay here so she [her mom] doesn’t have to keep switching schools for us or anything.” Heaven shared this in response to the most important factor in her decision to transfer to Success Academy. In retrospect it was particularly interesting that Joshua considered the benefits the school could provide as a condition for him to transfer while Heaven was more concerned with not having to transfer schools anymore. Conversely, RJ’s priority was on getting a good education and necessary skills to provide for a wife and children and to have a bright future.

Darkwing has attended Success Academy since second grade after attending two traditional public schools. Her mother Karen states, “I don’t want her [Darkwing] in a military academy but I insist on structure.” Moreover, Karen expounds,

I would’ve elected to put her in private school. However, I am not from this area so I wasn’t informed about the better schools. I would’ve liked for her to go to Superior Day School [pseudonym] but I didn’t want to put her in a situation at that time where she would’ve felt impoverished or behind. For example, when she gets to high school and sees children driving BMWs to school.

While Darkwing attended Success Academy last year she transferred briefly to another charter school that focused on math and science and touts that its focus is to equip

students for college and close the achievement gap for at-risk students. From Darkwing and her mother's accounts it was a traumatic experience for Darkwing. Karen further states,

I transferred Darkwing and it was a disaster. It was a diverse school and I want her in a diverse school but it was ridiculous. That was the worst mistake I made. I draw the line when a teacher tells a classroom of children that they weren't being raised properly and that they should spend more time studying. . . . I called the director and principal [of Success Academy] and asked them if I could bring her back and then she got back to herself.

Darkwing shared her experience at the other charter school and as she talked about the experience her whole demeanor changed. She seemed upset as she talked and states,

Last year I went to another school at the beginning of the school year so I was here for like a semester and then I switched over there and when I came back I only had a semester left. That experience was not good, let's just say that. You just should have been there. It was something. It was something.

Darkwing and her mother's description of her educational experience at the other charter middle school supports the research summarized in Chapter II. All schools are not created equal and charter schools by definition are not necessarily affording the student participants a sound educational opportunity. Yet, when examining the cultural attributes of Success Academy, it seems to be making a difference in the lives of the student participants. Parents must be good consumers of educational information and do their homework when deciding what choice is best for their children.

During the focus group session students had a profound discussion about their transition to high school. The student participants were very much aware of the options

they have available to them after Success Academy. In fact, the whole process was very intricate yet the students knew how to begin the process, that they needed teacher recommendations, and that they have lots of options because of the large public school district in their city. My impressions were that students were planning to go to public high schools but most expressed a desire to go to a high school that specializes. For instance, students knew the public school district has academy high schools that focus on medicine and engineering and lots of other fields. They also knew that some high schools offer a variety of AP and college courses.

Students were incredibly knowledgeable about all of their options and how important it is to get good teacher recommendations and keep their grades up so they have the option to go where they desire. Sarah, who attended two traditional public schools, explains why students shouldn't misbehave in school. She shares,

When you get in eighth grade you have to have teacher recommendations to go to—if you want to go to certain high schools. So if you do that now [be a class clown], and you continue to do that until you get into eighth grade—I wouldn't recommend you for—they're not going to give you a good recommendation. So you won't get into the high school that you want to, and then you'll end up going somewhere that you really don't want to.

In spite of all of their knowledge about the opportunities available to them, Darkwing expresses that she won't be heartbroken if she doesn't get into the school she wants to attend but she will be reflecting on what happened. She adds,

I'm going to apply, but if I don't get into one [academy school] then—right, I won't be heartbroken—but I would really like to go to it. If I really wanted—to go to high school—like if it was my last option and I got, you know, like nobody else accepted me, maybe the last one accepted me, then I would be like dang,

what did I do with my life? Where did I go wrong? What didn't I do in middle school—to you know, not be able to get into the high school that I want to? Because after a certain amount of times you get turned down then you start to question yourself like what if I had done this better, would I have gotten in?

This concern over the transition to high school was not a concept that I had on my radar but was very important to students. Because of the in-depth knowledge these disadvantaged Black students had about their next steps, as a principal I began to think about my students and whether they have this in-depth knowledge about their options for high school. Moreover, these student participants recognize that their behavior has an important connection to their need for teacher recommendations. Therefore they have made the decision to behave in a manner that will afford them the good recommendations they need. While it is important to note that several of the students had family members who have been through the high school transition and that helped them have background knowledge, the fact that they were paying attention speaks to their commitment and their personal involvement in their futures.

Research about at-risk or disadvantaged students would suggest that the student participants do not have the motivation or the investment in their academic experiences to strategically navigate through school (Banks, McQuater, & Sonne, 1995; Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Castenell, 1984; Finn, 1989; Finn, Folger, & Cox, 1991; Finn & Rock, 1997; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Gutman & Midgley, 2000). However, these young people are equipped with tools to be successful and have a vision for what they want and how to go about getting it. They defy the stereotypes of students caught in the achievement gap and at-risk for dropping out of school.

The culture of Success Academy fosters a desire for the disadvantaged student participants in this case study to be cognizant of what they need to accomplish in order to be successful in the future. As mentioned in Chapter III, the school was very structured and organized. Students seemed to know the routines and most I observed operated effectively within them. Most of the student participants had positive things to say about the traditional public schools they previously attended. However, they also acknowledged stark differences with regards to the instructional, organizational, social and cultural attributes of traditional public schools as compared to Success Academy. None of these important elements could stand-alone and accurately represent the major topics that emerged from this case study data. All of these topics are intricately interwoven to create a framework for success that has benefited the student participants in their quest to successfully complete their middle school educational experience in preparation for high school and beyond. The culture of Success Academy fosters a desire for the disadvantaged Black student participants in this case study to be cognizant of what they need to do in order to be successful in the future, thereby leading to academic achievement.

While examining the importance of schools providing a smooth transition for new or transfer students as a significant element of the school culture of a school, it is meaningful to consider the role of critical race theory (CRT) and its relation to the student participants' value on the role of school culture in schools to ensure students are prepared for the next level of their education. Yosso (2006) acknowledges that students of color have their own ideas, perceptions, and knowledge about what is important to

them and because educators may think of students of color as disadvantaged because of being born into poverty, their concerns or priorities may be neglected and deemed unimportant. This unfortunate reality results in a lack of understanding and recognition for the knowledge and cultural capital that disadvantaged Black students have with regards to navigating the school culture and the importance placed on what is necessary for them to access and successfully function in the school environment.

Not only have the student participants in this research study shared a focus on school culture and the role of schools to transition students well, their parents also stressed the importance of schools equipping students with the cultural capital to become successful adults so they won't have to settle for a job at McDonalds. Yosso (2006) further clarifies,

Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances, often without the objective means to attain those goals. (pp. 77–78)

Parent participants expressed their desire for their children to have an opportunity to access their hopes and dreams and have the skill set to do so when they leave school despite the potential obstacles they face.

School culture and climate is a vital element of school success for middle school students and to ensure successful transitions happen and that students are on the path to pursue college and careers. This is no exception for the student participants. One means to combat the issues that arise as a part of student's normal adolescent development is the

establishment of a positive and nurturing culture that affords students a safe place to mature and find their own identity with a balance of challenge and support from those surrounding them. The establishment of a positive school culture helps students, especially those of low socioeconomic status (SES) to develop motivation to learn (Kinsler & Gamble, 2001). Because the transition to middle school is often a very difficult one for students, characterized by emotional, physical, and interpersonal changes, it is no surprise that school culture and transition for students was a recurring topic. Simultaneously, middle school students undergo a major transition to a new school setting that can often be a source of stress as they attempt to adjust to a new school and increased expectations for academic independence and more mature social behavior. Schools and their readiness to assist students with this transition are significant to ensure students are well equipped for these adjustments.

A focus on how culture and climate is structured for inclusiveness within a school can help students with the adjustment of being new to a school. The student participants in this case study were very enlightened about their options for high school, as discussed previously in this chapter. One matter the researcher considers is how the student participants will transition back into traditional public schools when they enter high school.

The cultural attributes of how schools transition new or transfer students were an important topic presented. Students and parents alike expressed how important the transition to Success Academy had been for them. The traditional public schools they

left had been satisfactory to a point but the transition to middle school was a very important one and one they took very seriously.

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the difficulties middle school students face with all of the physical, emotional, and interpersonal changes that occur during this period of their development. The transition to high school is also a period of angst for most students as they know the importance of what they do in high school will determine their future options. An element that was interwoven throughout the stories of the students and their parents were the feeling or belief that they were in a better school because they were attending an academy school or charter school.

When students make the transition back to traditional public high schools, how will their feelings of superiority by having attended a charter school impact them when they matriculate to high school and re-enter traditional public schools with the students they left? The students they left were felt to have had no choice but to stay in traditional public schools. Therefore, I wonder how Success Academy students will blend with their traditional public school student counterparts.

Hopefully the transition to high will be a good one for all. Moreover, with the variety of options available to the students for high school, it is likely that the student participants could all be going separate ways. The family atmosphere is so prevalent at Success Academy, how students will manage the change in school size, leaving their friends, and transitioning to a new high school is an interesting discourse on their futures.

Each of the students in this research study transferred to Success Academy. Pipher (2002) when writing about refugee students discloses, "Schools are the sacred

ground of refugees, and education is their shared religion” (p. 113). I contend that education is the shared religion for all students, not just refugees, but especially students who have moved or transferred from one school to another. Adjusting to a new school environment can be a challenge but is necessary in order for students to succeed.

Transitioning between students was the topic discussed in this section.

Class Size

Class size has come under much scrutiny in recent years as a school improvement instrument. Many researchers indicate that smaller class size can have a positive impact on student achievement while others disagree, indicating minimal improvements on achievement. Despite the disagreement, disparities in spending, class size, and other resources are the norm for many schools and school districts across the country (Biddle & Berlinger, 2002; Blatchford, Bassett, & Brown, 2011; Blatchford, Bassett, Goldstein, & Martin, 2003; Brühwiler & Blatchford, 2011; Carter & Welner, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Ehrenberg, Brewer, Gamoran, & Willms, 2001; Graue, Hatch, Rao, & Oen, 2007; Moe & Chubb, 2009). The benefits for smaller class size are more profound for disadvantaged Black students. To add credence, Graue et al. (2007) report, “The effects of small classes seem to be the most positive in the early grades and for African American students and students living in poverty” (p. 673).

Each of the teachers mentioned small class size and the small school setting as a key to the success of the student participants in their classrooms and their school. Not only were these factors present in the stories of students and their parents, but teachers also perceived that small size was a deciding factor for students and parents when

choosing to leave traditional public schools for Success Academy. Additionally, teachers supposed that parents were not pleased with their children's experiences in traditional public schools and felt their children would get a better educational experience at a charter school, which was reinforced by the parent participant narratives.

The student, parent, and teacher participants in this research study are not researchers but know the benefits of having smaller class size. Five of the nine students revealed their thoughts on class size. Additionally, parents', and teachers' perceptions are shared in this subsection in their own words. Louise summarizes the parent perspective best. She states,

He [Mo] is in a smaller setting with the smaller class size. The charter school gave us the smaller, intimate environment, which we thought was good for our family and our son. When you are advanced you sometimes get lost in your attention. We didn't want him to fall into that so going to Success Academy was the way for us. I like that they [Success Academy] don't have 900 kids right now.

Mary affirms, "In looking at middle school options I knew he [Joshua] would have challenges in public school. I looked for smaller class ratio and what was more like a family so he [Joshua] wouldn't just become another middle school kid." Subsequently, Rachel adds,

The whole setup is different how they run their classes, class sizes. NE is a bigger school but it is crowded to me. The classes are not overflowed so that the teachers can get to everyone. The class size is good and not so large. She [Carmen] can ask her teachers and they don't forget about her or forget to talk to her.

While teachers and parents expressed their views, students too had very strong opinions about class size.

Student participants talked about how they liked that they had a smaller school and smaller classes. Bianca suggests, “I was scared to go to public school because it’s a lot more—it’s a lot more children.” When asked why her grades were so much better at Success Academy she simply states, “The classes are smaller.” Carmen shares this thinking and explains why her grades weren’t good but improved since she’s been attending Success Academy and how Success has impacted her life positively.

Carmen reports, “How teachers are helping me and stuff; they were still helping me at [the traditional public school], but they didn’t get to because the class was too big.” Not only did the students think smaller class size was good for them but Sarah communicated that her fourth grade year in traditional public school was not good. She had six different teachers because they kept leaving or weren’t high quality. She went on to say that teachers don’t like larger class size. She explains,

In fourth grade I had one, two, three, I had six teachers in fourth grade, six different teachers throughout one year. Because in fourth grade that was the biggest class—like they had—they had six different classes, three Spanish Immersion and three English, and in the three English there was a lot of kids . . . so they had to split us up and there were a lot of kids and you know, teachers don’t really like to work in environments with a lot of kids because that’s a lot of work. So I had different teachers throughout the year and the last teacher that I had, she was—she was really a good teacher but the teachers that I had before, like I said, gave us busywork and things like that.

Sarah expressed that teachers don’t like to work in larger environments, at least that was her impression. Because of that her classroom was a revolving door and her worst school

year. No student can afford the experience of having constant inconsistency among teachers and instruction.

Unfortunately, the revolving door that Sarah referred to is not just an issue at her former schools. Ramona adds to this discussion, “The teacher turnover is high and it does not seem to bother the administration or board, even while several parents have mentioned this and taken their children out due to this problem.” Moreover, several of the student participants mentioned that one of their beloved teachers left in the middle of the year but that she had given them her phone number so they could keep in touch.

Most people wouldn’t expect that students who need help don’t get it because there are too many students. Yet, when there are larger numbers of students the teacher’s attention is divided among all of them. Moreover, teaching assistants are rare in middle schools so providing additional support in the classroom with a teacher to student ratio of 1:30, the class size maximum in North Carolina for middle grades, the results for the student participants are not good. Because many disadvantaged Black students are behind academically, they need the very best teacher and the most intervention in order to overcome their academic deficits. Darling-Hammond (2010) further explains that in order for student achievement to improve for all students, schools need to be set up for teachers to be successful in “knowing and reaching their students” (p. 234). One way to ensure teachers know and reach their students is to provide smaller class sizes so teachers can evaluate what students know and can adjust instruction accordingly.

This section was presented to synthesize perceptions about class size and its impact on the student participants’ educational experiences. Not only does small class

size benefit students but the smaller school environment was also desirable and served as a reason for several of the student participants to transfer to Success Academy.

Consequently, small class size is not an attribute specific or essential to charter schools.

It is essential and needed for all schools. Furthermore, the students hypothesize that teachers don't like to work in large environments resulting in teacher turnover and a revolving door of teachers. Constant teacher turnover is a negative influence on students' educational experiences that no students can afford. Negative experiences like a revolving door of teachers leaves a lasting impression on students and their parents. The next section is devoted to the factors that impacted the student and parent participants' decision to transfer to Success Academy and their impressions of the school choice options available to them while making their decision.

Impressions about School Quality

Discussion about the impressions of school quality was recurring in the data. Not only were impressions about school quality one of the most important deciding factors in the student participants' decision of which school to attend, but it was also an important factor to their parents. Whether their impressions were good or bad about the school options available to them, the student participants and their families strongly considered these impressions when making the choice of what middle school to attend.

The research is shallow when it comes to the perceptions of Black middle school students on their educational experiences. Subsequently, there is little research that examines Black middle school students and the thought processes they and their families undergo with regards to exercising choice about schooling. Loukas and Murphy (2007)

conducted an extensive study of 488 middle school students and their perceptions about school climate. Yet the study did not address the student participants and their perceptions about schools when making a choice about what school to attend. This section shares an examination of impressions about school quality, choice options and how the student participants and their families chose Success Academy for their middle school experience.

Student participants in this case study were very open with regards to impressions about the school quality or lack thereof for the schools in their communities. They had very strong opinions about schools and revealed how these opinions and views impacted their choice to attend Success Academy. Heaven declared with great pride as evidenced by her nonverbal signals and the huge smile on her face, “It’s my first time in academy school because it’s kind of better than the other schools. It’s different because this is an academy and it’s close to a church. And the other ones, they were just public schools.” She went on to explain less violence and less bullying made it a better school to attend.

Heaven was not alone in her view that Success Academy was the best place for her to be. Darkwing commented that her mother wanted her to get away from public school systems because the curriculum was too easy. Darkwing’s mother referenced why she wanted her away from public schools. Karen states, “After first grade I couldn’t take it anymore. Teachers are not being paid to teach. They are being disciplinarians who elude the ability to teach.” Moreover, a negative perception about traditional public schools’ instructional attributes prevailed throughout the data. Carmen shares,

My sister thought that [the traditional public middle school] was not a school for me. So I went over to summer camp and this man, he said that this [Success Academy] is a good school. Go here and he said it would be great if I stayed and went here so she [Rachel] put me here.

Carmen later remarked that her friends at the traditional public middle school she previously attended text her and tell her how bad the school is still.

The negative impressions shared about the traditional public schools were emphasized by memories that the students and parents recalled. Louise recaps what she says was the most important thing she remembers about Mo's experience at his previous school. She recalls,

We got a call from school one day that he [Mo] was sick and throwing up. He is allergic to nuts and immediately we thought he'd had a reaction. Immediately I left work to pick him up and I found out that the AC wasn't working and the classrooms were smoking hot. This teacher brought her own fan into school to cool and then she turned around and used it for punishment. IF [emphasis added] they weren't quiet she would turn it off. He [Mo] was hot and needed water but he didn't ask because she had been telling everyone that they couldn't go and get water so he decided it wasn't a good idea to ask so with heat exhaustion he got sick. . . . I was really disappointed that that is what it had come to--using heat as a punishment.

This story is astonishing that something like this could happen in any school. Mary shared another disheartening memory. She recalls,

I've had teachers [at the traditional public schools] say he [Joshua] was the worst student and that they wished they wouldn't have him in their class. One other teacher said they don't understand how this type of student was at the magnet school. It was on a document that I wasn't supposed to see at a meeting that was going on that I wasn't invited to. I can only imagine what was said and done in front of him.

With this type of teacher behavior occurring in school, it is not surprising that parents sought a different educational opportunity for their children.

The focus group discussion about impressions on school quality included a feeling that students who attend traditional public schools do so because they don't have other options. Sarah explains,

I think that some people that go to public schools are just there because they have to go to—have to go to school. Here I think our parents care about us and want the best for us, and that's—I'm not saying that the other students'—parents don't.

The group was asked if they felt their education was equal to or the same as other students in their former schools. Mo claims,

I think it is better. No, this is better. Well when I was at the other schools I felt like I was a little bit smarter than the rest of them, because some of them didn't grasp certain subjects as well as I did.

Sarah adds to this concept of equal education as it relates to student thoughts about schools. Sarah comments on how busywork in traditional public schools impacted students and their options,

Some of them took it well, I guess, you know, they did it, got good grades and things like that. Others weren't—others, I would say their parents weren't very happy with that, but they couldn't really do anything about it because their child, that was like the district school. Everybody had to go to that district unless you moved and you go to another school.

The literature review in Chapter II addressed the concerns that have arisen over the student participants and their ability to choose high quality schools. Conversely, Sarah's

analysis indicated that from her perspective, some students had no other option but to stay in the district traditional public school where there was a lot of busywork because they couldn't move or go to another school. Students' perceptions of in essence being trapped in a failing school is particularly concerning because students who do not have high perceptions of their school or school climate often have difficulty sustaining their engagement in school and thereby their academic achievement putting them at risk of dropping out of school.

The elements that emerged from this section on impressions about school quality included elite or superiority status of academy schools, another term that is used for charter schools. The idea that attending an academy school was superior to other schools was evidenced throughout the student interviews because the students wear uniforms and because their parents must provide transportation for them. Moreover, with that mindset of superiority came the belief that students were attending Success Academy because they were smarter or had more desire to succeed than the students they attended school with at their previous traditional public schools. Not only did the student participants share this outlook, but some of the parents did as well. To illustrate, Sarah shared that her dad had a negative perception of students who attend traditional public schools.

Sarah states,

He [her dad], you know, it's like he feels girls that go there [traditional public schools] are, I'm not gonna say girls, I'm gonna say young people that go there, they don't really wanna do anything, you know, they don't want to really become something. And he wants me to become something, which is—I appreciate that.

Most students and parents alike would say that the best school is the one their child attends. Therefore, it was not surprising that the students had a high opinion of Success Academy.

The student participants and their parents sharing the perception that attending an academy or charter school is superior to traditional public schools was a dynamic that was very intriguing. Karen confirms, “She’s [Darkwing] at a definite advantage per capita being at a charter school rather than being at a public school. I do realize though there are charter and magnet schools that fall by the wayside.” The implication was, however that Success Academy was not one of those schools.

CRT scholars focus on the inequity in schools and educational opportunities that prevail despite legislation like *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that created integrated schools. Additionally, educational reforms designed to provide parents with choice in their children’s education have not rid society of the ongoing discussion of the achievement gap. Subsequently, Delgado (1988) and Solorzano and Yosso (2001) challenge, “CRT theorists posit that any ‘story’ that claims to include or refer to the lives of subordinated peoples is incomplete until it takes into account and includes the voices of those people who have lived the experience of subordination” (as cited in Love, 2004, p. 228).

The students and parents in this research study shared their stories about educational experiences in traditional public schools and their high poverty charter middle school. The reality is that the students are attending a high poverty school with few options of a better educational delivery system. Thus, they are dependent upon the

choice options that the prevailing and politically charged educational system makes available to them. Therefore, the telling of their stories helps to build an understanding of the perceptions of the research study consumers about the educational opportunities available to them and how well or how poorly these educational options were perceived.

CRT is a valuable lens to not only present the stories of the case study participants but it also serves as a means to construct the reality of the study participants since they are most often not represented in the literature. This research study does not seek to uncover an absolute truth or to make generalizations. However, it does seek to uncover the perceptions concerning the educational experiences, past and present, of the student participants and how these educational experiences are impacting their academic outcomes.

This section introduced impressions about school quality and the belief that the student participants held that their attendance at Success Academy was superior to students attending traditional public schools. Additionally, a belief that students attending traditional public schools were trapped in those schools with no other options was introduced.

The participants in this research study shared their thoughts about how important schooling and learning are to them and the understood value they place on education. They clearly understand that quality teaching and learning are important to the overall purpose of schools and that student performance is the key to their successful transition to high school and further education. Moreover, organizational factors that influence class size, teacher turnover, and having an environment that is conducive to learning are all key

to their academic experiences being positive ones. Chapter VI will address the remaining two themes—needs of students in schools and the absence of race, and the recurring categories of focus that fall within them.

CHAPTER VI

DATA ANALYSIS: A CLIMATE OF RELATIONSHIPS

Chapter VI is devoted to exploring the other two themes that emerged from the eleven recurring categories of focus presented in Chapter III (see Figure 4). Ultimately, I set out to discover what factors most impacted the educational experiences of the disadvantaged students in this research study and what the catalyst for their investment in their education was. Through the process of data analysis, this resulted in an examination of the importance of relationships. Wimberly (2002) states that school relationships foster students' educational expectations for future success. Therefore, this chapter will address the categories of focus that are a part of the remaining two themes—needs of students in schools and the absence of race (see Figure 7). One such relationship established and discussed by the student participants were the behaviors of Principal Clark. The next section will explain principal behaviors and how they apply to the discourse of a climate of relationships.

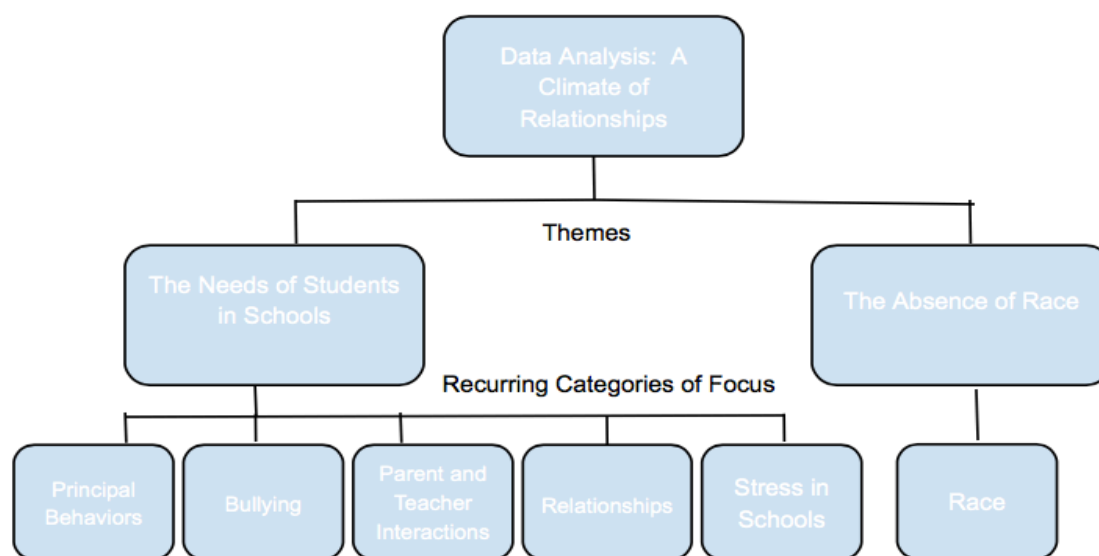


Figure 7. Data Analysis: A Climate of Relationships.

Principal Behaviors

Principals who support and solicit input from all stakeholders and make decisions with the best interest of students in mind create learning environments that are supportive of student achievement and positive educational experiences. Principals in charter schools often have more flexibility and ability to make decisions that will impact the social influence of schools. Through utilizing site-based management (SBM) as a tool for school improvement, principals have the ability to make a difference in the instructional, organizational, social, and cultural structures within the school environment. Principal leadership is one of the most effective tools for school improvement (Cotton, 2003). The participants in this case study also acknowledged the importance of principal behaviors as a key element of their educational experiences.

Sarah, Darkwing, and RJ mentioned interactions they had with principals both at Success Academy and at their traditional public schools. One of the most candid

responses about principals and assistant or vice principals was RJ's. He articulated that one of the major problems with administrators is that they didn't listen to him.

Specifically, an assistant principal at one of his traditional public schools was described negatively. RJ explains,

One vice principal is the most utmost horrible. She likes to cut me off at points where I'm right in the situation. Whether I'm wrong or right she likes to cut me off and not let me explain anything even though I was the victim.

A principal RJ mentioned as being mean at times was also considered a good guy and cool. RJ explains how that principal gained these positive characteristics. RJ reflects,

Well, for starters, he liked to dress up for Halloween. He was a knight and I said, 'that's pretty cool, Mr. Principal.' I can't remember his name but he was the best. And when I was at his office he'd asked me what happened—then call over my parent to help fix the situation, sometimes. He just lectured me sometimes. And that was fine. And then this one time I wore a *I Tune You Out* shirt and he was like oh really now, because he read my shirt, and then he pulled me in the office. I was like I didn't even do anything and he was like that's okay, you can go now.

The key to the positive nature of these reflections about former administrators speaks to relationships. It is so important for students to have relationships with teachers and administrators because these relationships enhance their educational experiences in school and can lead to increased student achievement. Furthermore, student's confidence that the principal will protect them and keep them safe is another fundamental principal behavior students need to feel safe and secure at school. It was the principal at Success Academy that both RJ and Sarah felt would take care of issues. RJ expounds,

I don't have to worry about bullying because they don't tolerate that here [Success Academy]. It's unacceptable and they take care of it right away if I go to the principal. If I don't, well they can't help me. They want to, but they can't.

RJ and Sarah had confidence that they would not be a victim at Success Academy because Principal Clark had communicated with either spoken or unspoken rules that bullying behaviors would not be tolerated.

This subsection focused on principal behaviors and how the role of principals is to provide leadership to ensure social justice is realized in schools. It is also the principal who sets the tone and expectations for student behavior, which is one of the key points Carmen, Heaven, and RJ mentioned. Principals who create and nurture relationships and learning environments that are supportive of student achievement and positive educational experiences help to ensure student success.

Eliminating student behaviors including bullying and violence is vital to ensuring safe and orderly schools. Helping the student participants to develop positive self-esteem and the motivation to excel is a challenge, but not impossible. Obviously at Success Academy, Principal Clark exhibits many characteristics of a leader who is willing to listen and responds appropriately to the needs of students, staff, and parents. The next subsection presents the topic of student behaviors like violence and bullying and perceptions about how the behaviors of their classmates impact the educational experiences of the student participants.

Bullying

Adolescent violence is an unfortunate part of the middle school experience in most schools across the country. Lockwood (1997) reports,

Data from assault studies reveal that arguments resulting in violence are a considerable problem for American youths, as both victims and aggressors. The problem is growing, as juveniles' risk of victimization has risen since the mid-1980s, especially among African-Americans. (p. 1)

It is also worth noting that incidents of violence are prevalent among boys and girls and generally among students who know each other.

Icard (2014) defines bullying as “someone repeatedly using his power (social or physical) to degrade, harass, or humiliate someone else” (part 2, section 5, para. 3).

Bullying has gotten a lot of media attention and the term bullying is used frequently in schools resulting in a need for school policies and practices to handle bullies and victims. Six of the nine student participants in this case study recalled bullying as part of their educational experiences. The most profound instances involved RJ, Carmen, and Heaven.

RJ experienced the most bullying and admittedly made some decisions of which he wasn't proud. His experiences are similar to the Black male students Ferguson (2001) describes as exhibiting inappropriate behavior as part of their persona to be cool. Not only did RJ experience bullying, but he also joined a gang as the result of peer pressure and his desire not to be bullied. He shares,

I was on honor roll once in fourth grade, but then my grades dropped when I tried to fit in with all the other Black students there [former traditional public school] and like all stereotypical Black men, they like to be in gangs. They like to shoot gang signs, graffiti, and a bunch of other stuff. I fit in with them but I was never in a gang, actually. I was, I used to be, so I fit in and they all liked me from me thinking that that was the only way that I wasn't gonna get bullied. I went on with it and it worked perfectly fine.

In sixth grade I only stayed there for like half of the year and then I moved to another school after my parents got divorced. So the people there didn't like me because I was smart, so they called me nerd and stuff. Soon after I told them about my martial arts skills they left me alone again, like everybody else. Then there was this one kid; he thought I stole his pencil but what I really was trying to do was return it so he pushed me up against the wall. I wanted to punch him but then the teacher came. Then we, they broke it up.

So at [former traditional middle school] I met a lot of cool guys. They were pretty good but some of them, no, I didn't mess with them, not because I was scared but because I knew somebody was gonna get hurt and it wasn't gonna be me. I was gonna hurt somebody; I'm gonna break somebody's bones if they tried—if they try to mess with me. I wasn't kidding around there. It was every man for himself. The teachers tried, some of the teachers tried to help me and I accepted their help but some of the teachers, they just didn't even care what I did. Because like whenever I tried to tell them something they cut me off. They just weren't listening. They didn't want to, and at that point I knew to stop seeking help and be a man. I can't go to help all the time because when they're gone what am I gonna do? What am I gonna do, go to a gravestone and ask for some help?

RJ describes an unfortunate reality for some Black males who think they have to put on a tough exterior as a coping mechanism or think they must hurt someone before they get hurt. Teachers and administrators must be sensitive to the plight of students, especially those who have a proclivity to get in trouble. Behind misbehavior is usually a story and often it is a story that goes untold but results in disadvantaged Black males' transition to the pipeline to prison with increased placement in special education classes (Adkison-Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, & Plunkett, 2006; Blanchett, 2006, 2009; Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Salend & Garrick, 2005) and out of school suspensions (Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Kinsler, 2011; Public Schools of North Carolina, State Board of Education, & Department of Public Instruction, 2015a; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

As aforementioned, inappropriate behavior and violence is not limited to boys. Carmen mentioned in her individual interview as well as the focus group that she got into a fight at her previous school. In her interview not only did she talk about the fight but about the behavior of the students at her former school. She elaborates,

I had a lot of friends and I had good grades and my friends, they began trouble but I don't get in it and they tell me to help them and I'd be like, no. I don't need to entertain. Yeah, I almost got into two fights there [previous traditional public school] because girls want to start stuff with me . . . so fights come every week and I got into a fight there. They don't have no sense; they always messing with people, always getting in trouble. They just don't care. They are always talking about the teachers, cussing them out.

The behavior Carmen mentioned is not atypical in middle schools and is more prevalent in schools that are overrepresented by Black and Latino students. However, inappropriate behavior is counterproductive for student achievement and threatens to derail students' academic achievement by lending itself to increased likelihood of dropping out of school.

Heaven stated that if she had a chance to talk to her former principals and teachers she would tell them to stop bullying forever because in her words, public schools "have all types of violence." On one occasion at her former school she experienced first hand a potential act of violence. She reports,

This girl, one time I said I didn't like her because she was mean and stuff and then she—we were sitting at the lunch table together. . . . She said that she had a knife in her book bag and she was going to take it out and stab me in my stomach.

Fortunately Heaven wasn't stabbed and the principal was involved but students who go to school in fear of violence are unable to fully concentrate on the reason they attend school, to learn. Heaven explains that because she attends Success Academy doesn't mean she is exempt from inappropriate behavior. She comments that there are still people who occasionally talk about her but it doesn't happen as frequently as at her former traditional public schools.

Heaven's mother, Jane also disclosed that Heaven dealt with bullying all the time at her former school and that she still deals with it at Success Academy. The difference is that she is learning to take it in stride and not to worry about what people say. She comments, "She went through a lot of bullying in public school and unnecessary for no reason, pretty much because of who she was. She's a good kid and that went against her with a lot of things." Despite the fact that she is still experiencing name calling on a daily basis Jane states,

She has matured in leadership. She still experiences problems with other kids, not knowing why she's not liked, them being mean for no reason. She doesn't allow that to affect her school and she has mastered staying focused on school and she knows what she is in school for and does that.

Jane further revealed Heaven stands up for those less fortunate and knows to go to staff if there is a problem, and that they will listen. Jane communicated that it hurts her to see this happen to Heaven and she doesn't understand why it is happening but she applauds Success Academy's handling of the matter. Jane informed me that early on when the bullying behavior started at Success Academy she talked to Principal Clark and the

situation got better. She also shared that Heaven is comfortable talking to school staff about issues when they arise and that she feels confident they will do something about it.

It is disheartening to think that students experience this type of persistent bullying. Moreover, according to Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, and Fan (2010), students don't often report bullying or acts of violence or seek help from school administrators. As RJ indicated, students are less likely to seek help as they get older. Accordingly, students who suffer bullying experience a plethora of negative effects including, "anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and increased risk for suicide" (Eliot et al., 2010, para. 4). The student participants who experienced bullying may have thought that leaving traditional public schools would eliminate this negative student behavior from their lives. Regrettably, that was not the case, although it seems to be less severe.

Teacher participants at Success Academy did not indicate there were problems with students getting along. Perhaps teachers are not made aware of the issues but teachers should also be equipped with tools for conflict resolution and dealing with bullying effectively to ensure students have adequate supports to overcome bullying and to have a fair and consistent reporting system. Bullying is such a mainstream topic and the effects of bullying can be so detrimental to students' wellbeing and sense of belonging that more research is needed to gain a better understanding of how teachers and administrators foster a culture of respect within schools where bullying is not an issue. In highly impactful and successful schools, students feel a part of the school community and a mutual respect for others.

I believe students who do not bully and who treat others respectfully do so out of a positive sense of self worth and respect for themselves. This respect does not come from one's innate ability but must be taught and cultivated. The student participants at Success Academy were not mean spirited children and the researcher did not observe obvious tendencies to bully others in spite of the realization that most students have a tendency to engage in inappropriate behavior at some point during their lives.

Teachers expressed a belief that the leadership of the school supported the maintenance of discipline and high expectations for students with regards to conduct and academics. As an outsider in the school, I observed this sense of discipline first hand with a couple of students who were misbehaving. Principal Clark met with the parents of these students and explained the expectations of student behavior at Success Academy. Parents were so adamant that they wanted their child to attend Success Academy that they reassured the principal that the child's misbehavior would not continue. Subsequently, as I was interviewing students for this research study, there was an occasion when I came to observe Carmen but could not because she was suspended from school because of misbehavior. The staff explained that misbehavior is not tolerated at Success Academy.

Some students and parents may not like the strict discipline policies in place at Success Academy. However, the students and parents in this research study appreciated being safe in their school. Maintaining a safe and orderly school and classroom environment is one of the most important tasks teachers and administrators are charged with. Students who do not feel safe and secure in their environment are not able to focus

on learning. Therefore, success Academy's focus on student discipline and structure within the school help students know the parameters and how to operate successfully within them.

This section focused on bullying and school violence as a part of the educational landscape. Principals who proactively deal with these issues can prevent them from becoming larger issues that cripple student achievement. Moreover, schools with strong administrative and instructional leadership must work together with all stakeholders to ensure the culture and climate of the school is conducive for growth and development of students, involves parents, and creates an environment where all students are free to express themselves in a safe and nurturing environment. The next section addresses an important topic of focus, parent and teacher interactions.

Parent and Teacher Interactions

Parent involvement was an important part of the data analysis. Parents were actively involved and engaged in the decision making process for students when making the decision to leave their traditional public schools for Success Academy.

Parents are more likely to be involved in education—and students are more likely to achieve at higher levels—when there are strong policies for partnership, when teachers and schools invite participation in various ways, when schools plan comprehensive activities, and when parents see their role as direct involvement. (Auerbach, 2010, p. 759)

While parental involvement is such an important role in helping all students, not just disadvantaged Black middle school students to achieve, this is particularly important for

the students in this research study since many of them come to school underprepared, as shared by their teachers.

The teachers at Success Academy acknowledged that one of their greatest challenges is having parents that are able to support and reinforce education at home. Rebecca explains,

I enjoy teaching low-income, Black students. I see their passion for learning in their eyes. However, for some I believe that there is no continuation of schoolwork at home. Their learning seems to stop when school is out.

Students who are already behind in many cases cannot afford for learning to stop when school is out. Paul elaborates on what he sees as the biggest challenge he faces when educating the student participants, “The awareness and preparedness of families and students in what it actually takes to be a highly successful student. This manifests in one way in the lack of completion of homework, lack of preparation with materials for class.” Moreover, Ramona provides additional support and adds,

The biggest challenge I feel that I face when educating my students is the parents and home life. While several students have supportive parents, there are many that have parents that may not know the best way to help their child. Many parents do not attend school events, conferences or check in on their child's progress regularly. However, I understand this difficulty due to working and being busy, it's a hardship.

Parental support and collaborating with parents to help students succeed is an essential part of a successful school environment. It all begins with respect. Teachers must learn to respect the knowledge that all parents bring to the table about their child. Since the parent is the child's first teacher, parents bring background knowledge that is essential to

teachers to better understand the child, the familial and social relationships, and expectations. This understanding helps teachers capitalize on areas of priority for families and can teach more efficiently. Moreover, Dudley-Marling and Lucas (2009) state that schools must focus on the “funds of knowledge” (p. 369) that students bring to school to help them succeed.

Upon my visits to Success Academy, I saw numerous parents on campus coming and going, checking on students, meeting with the principal when students were having behavioral concerns and there were always a plethora of parents dropping kids off and picking them up in the afternoons. Cooper, Riehl, and Hasan (2010) explain,

Following years in which parents were blamed for having low involvement in their children’s education (or what was perceived as low involvement), more educators now understand that parents help their children in a variety of ways and that when parent involvement is low, the cause often lies within the schools in making parents feel welcome or underappreciated or as though they cannot trust educators. (p. 758)

Consistent parent support for all students is a challenge that Success Academy and all schools face regularly and routinely. However, keeping an open mind and welcoming parents to schools are a vital part of school success and thereby increase student success. While teachers at Success Academy may not think parental support is where they would like it to be, students and parents in this research study might be the exception to the rule. Capitalizing on building mutual trust and proactive relationships within parent groups is a focus Success Academy has that pays great dividends.

Despite the fact that teachers don’t think parents are as involved as they would like, the parents and students think otherwise. Mary acknowledged that she didn’t help

Joshua as much as she should have when he was in traditional public school with his organization that she states is a major problem for him. However, she discusses her work with him this year and states, “I have also cleaned his book bag out 50 times this year trying to help out with the organizational skills to make him accountable.” She also shares one thing she likes about the charter school is, “I like the academic component and his teachers know me to where if there is ever anything that goes on I will know about it immediately. Some teachers call me and some email me.” These are the words of a parent who wants to be involved and actively engaged in her child’s education. Additionally, Rachel’s comments about sitting in Carmen’s classrooms at Success Academy and at the previous traditional public schools illustrate her investment to ensure Carmen is afforded the best education possible.

Karen was very vocal about her involvement with Darkwing’s education, so much so that she even knew that some teachers in the school weren’t highly qualified. She expounds,

Some of the teachers weren’t certified teachers. For example, last year her [Darkwing’s] math teacher had a degree in engineering. For what they were teaching they weren’t certified. That’s important to me for one simple reason. I can teach a Spanish class but that doesn’t make me a good teacher. That takes training. I noticed all of the ones not certified aren’t there anymore so apparently I wasn’t the only parent that looked at that. She was taught well but it could’ve been better if it had been a certified teacher.

Karen also shares,

Every year I go to introduce myself to each of her [Darkwing’s] teachers. I tell them her good and bad points. I provide them with an email and a phone number for them to know that if they have any problem they can call me for any reason. I

don't think my child is perfect. I know all of her moods and all of her sneakiness. All her teachers have to say is do I need to call your mom and then she comes in and tells me about it. She knows if I hear about it from the teacher first it will anger me more.

This type of investment in the education of students is significant because it demonstrates parents who care and are willing to go the extra mile to support their children.

As previously mentioned, the students shared that they think their education is better than that in traditional public schools partly because of attending the academy school and because of the teaching they receive, but also because they think their parents are fully invested in their education to provide transportation for them to send them to Success Academy. The teacher comments allude to some degree of deficit thinking that CRT theorists would say handicaps their ability to fully reach their students.

Cooper, Allen, and Bettez (2009) purport that cultural sensitivity can be developed through culturally responsive education when educators concentrate on identifying their biases and work towards learning ways to make connections between home and school that is not based on deficit thinking. They propose professional learning communities as a way of establishing a collaborative conversation and to learn new culturally relevant skills to bridge the gap between home and school.

This section examined parent and teacher interactions, illuminated deficit thinking on the part of the teacher participants and applied the conceptual framework as a means of better understanding the perceptions of the participants. However, productive school-family partnerships are collaborative and beneficial when educators value the contributions and goodness of families and believe that families are invested in their

children's education. Teachers who maintain positive interactions and relationships with parents usually have good relationships with students. All students need to have a solid relationship with a caring and nurturing adult so students know they are important and supported. The next section will explore the recurring topic, relationships.

Relationships

The importance of having a kind, caring, and nurturing adult is one of the most important social factors for students in classrooms today. This is so much a part of the fabric of our expectations as educators that it is also a part of the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process (McRel & NC State Board of Education, 2012). Standard II focuses on teachers creating an environment in which students have “a positive nurturing relationship with caring adults” (McRel & NC State Board of Education, 2012, p. 9). Standard II also focuses on teachers creating an environment in which diverse learners can grow and thrive in an environment in which families share in a collaborative relationship with the teachers and the school.

Success Academy teacher participants shared that the most important social attributes of Success Academy were very much in harmony with the North Carolina teaching standards. When asked about the social factors that help students be successful, Ramona states, “caring and nurturing teachers.” Additionally, Rebecca adds, “We are like a family in a charter with a small school population. We develop a close relationship with our families and students. We believe in teamwork and ensuring our students are successful.”

One teacher participant, Rebecca thought that students have a good social relationship with each other because they are of the same race. Of course this is not necessarily true. People of the same race don't always get along with each other but for the most part, students at Success Academy report they get along well, their parents concur, and during the few months that I was in and out of the school, I agree as well.

Louise thinks it is positive that her son, Mo, has a positive relationship with staff at Success. She states,

The principal, office staff and everyone knows him so he feels like he matters so he can relax into his academia and it's okay to ask questions and okay to poke the teachers for information. They don't mind taking the time to give it to them.

Mary adds to the topic and says, "I like the communication piece, feels more like a family." She went on to add, "The principal [former principal] at the middle school was one of my professors at A&T [North Carolina A&T State University]. There was a relationship with him." Moreover, Rachel adds that Success Academy has changed Carmen's life positively and shares, ". . . because she [Carmen] grew close to certain teachers there. When she has things going on with her and when she needs to she will go to certain teachers and talk."

Examining the social attributes of caring and nurturing teachers revealed the importance of relationships and their potential influence on the educational experiences of the student participants. Relationships are such an important part of helping students to believe in themselves and to want to learn. As evidenced by the stories of the participants in this case study, clearly relationships are a vital component of successful

schools. This section primarily addressed teacher and student participant relationships. The next section addresses stress in schools and the importance of planning and preparation to the overall reduction of stress and angst in the school environment.

Stress in Schools

Two of the teacher participants mentioned a lack of pre-planning from administrators sometimes results in a chaotic and stressful feel and a sense of disorganization within the school. Organization provides structure for students and teachers alike. That structure is helpful so everyone in the school community knows what is expected of them and operates within those guidelines. Insecurity and stress occur as a result of not knowing. Therefore, when teachers at Success Academy noted that a sense of chaos or stress is sometimes present could impact student's ability to perform and thereby negatively impact their educational experiences. To add support for this notion of how stress can impact educational experiences, Karen shares a memory about an experience at Darkwing's former traditional public schools. She expounds,

. . . When talking to the teacher I wondered if she was looking at me or through me. She would have this bewildered or space cadet look on her face. Just from talking to her on a personal level she had a stressful lifestyle at that time. At [traditional public school], they had a principal there. She was dealing with a lot of politics and that would be the one catch phrase I associate with. Corners shouldn't be cut [with education] and there shouldn't be an issue.

Karen's experiences highlight stress and politics and the negative impact they can have. Furthermore, Paul elaborates on why he decided to pursue teaching at Success Academy. He writes, "My time in public school was very stressful and discouraging, particularly

because of how large my school was.” When asked how the previous experiences he discussed impacted his teaching, Paul records,

They discouraged me from wanting to continue to teach in public middle schools or high schools, and I began a master’s degree in TESOL [Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages], in order to teach adults in an alternative setting.

Clearly, Paul’s experience was so stressful he thought about discontinuing his teaching career. Ramona also shared that a negative organizational attribute of Success Academy includes, “The inconsistency in teachers and scheduling,” as well as “. . . The lack of planning ahead makes the school day, week, year chaotic and difficult as well.”

Despite teacher claims, neither students nor their parents expressed concern over a sense of disorganization. Thus, one might deduce that teachers successfully shield students from these stressful elements of the school. This ability to shield students is not unique to charter schoolteachers. Successful teachers shield students from any outside factors that don’t contribute to success in the classroom. The ability to create a safe and secure learning environment is an essential organizational element that successful schools exemplify. Next, race and its absence from the student and parent participants’ stories will be discussed.

Race

Critical race theory (CRT) as applied to a focus on education is to acknowledge inequality exists and perpetuates the seemingly insurmountable achievement gap between Black and White students in the United States. In fact, Ladson-Billings (2006) suggests we have an “education debt” rather than an achievement gap to further add credence to

the notion of our government's fostering of socially unjust policies and politics that replicate disparities of advantages for students of color in regards to equal access to schools, highly qualified teachers, instructional resources, technology, and community support. Based upon the presupposition that the achievement gap or "educational debt" continues to increase because of the disproportionate funding of schools based on racism and unequal educational policies that foster the great divide between the haves and the have-nots is a fundamentally accepted truth. Critical race theorists would argue that even school choice has its roots in bolstering educational inequality and deficit thinking about poor students of color and moves us towards the same inequality that existed in segregated schools before the influx of legal challenges of the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) era.

Critical race theory was employed as a critical lens through which this research study, the data collection process, and data analysis were approached. When analyzing the data through the lens of critical race theory, one key silence that emerged was race and its influence on the educational experiences of the student participants. In fact, when identifying the major topics of focus among the data sets, race was absent from the stories the student and parent participants told. Despite this silence, the teachers of Success Academy each had specific points they made about race and how it impacts their ability to educate their students.

The absence of race in the stories of the Black student participants and those of their parents was an unexpected outcome of the data analysis. As the researcher, it was assumed that race would play a role in the lives of and impact the educational

achievement of the disadvantaged students in the case study. However, in actuality, for the participants themselves, race either wasn't a major issue for them or was not something that they perceived as having a major influence on their educational experiences.

I have reflected upon the reality that the stories of the student participants in this case study were exempt of race and racism and when their parents were specifically asked if race had influenced their children's educational experiences, they all replied "no". I think the reason the students and parent participants did not acknowledge race as an influence on their educational experiences is because they predominantly live in a homogeneous community. The student participants mostly attended traditional public schools with demographics that matched those of Success Academy—high poverty, majority Black and Hispanic students. Likewise, the teachers and administrators in these schools were also majority Black. Therefore, I posit the students and their parents don't consider race a factor because they are constantly around people who look just like them.

Darkwing mentioned the only reference to diversity or race, when she referenced her temporary attendance at the other charter middle school where she had a very negative educational experience. That school was diverse in that students were from many different nationalities including Arab and Turkish students and teachers were diverse as well with Darkwing stating there were only two Black teachers. Darkwing had a very difficult time making a successful transition to this new environment where Black students weren't the majority. Moreover, she felt the anomaly of not fitting in and being made to feel like she wasn't being raised properly because she was Black.

Another consideration for why race was absent from the stories of the case study students and parents was the perception that millennials are not as concerned with race and in fact employ “colorblindness” (Bouie, 2014) as an ideal for equality. However, this idea of colorblindness results in the avoidance of race and racism and therefore millennials tend to have difficulty talking about race, racism, and fully understanding what racism is. Rather, Bouie (2014) states, “. . . like most Americans—millennials see racism as a matter of different treatment, justified by race, that you solve by removing race from the equation. If we ignore skin color in our decisions, then there can’t be racism” (para. 10). Moreover, it is uncomfortable to talk about issues involving race. Therefore, if race and racism isn’t talked about much in schools or at home students may not have a stance on how race might influence their educational experiences and the options that are available or unavailable to them. Therefore, I think a combination of the lack of focus on race, racism, and a value for colorblindness coupled with a homogenous school and community precluded the research study participants from thinking about race as influential on academic achievement.

Students at Success Academy are predominantly Black students with 94% of students identifying themselves as Black and 83% qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Considering these demographics, when asked how race has influenced students’ educational experiences in school, Paul reflects, “I am sure race has played a great role, such as being zoned for schools that are so underperforming that parents are dissatisfied. There are serious cultural gaps between schools and students’ communities.” Paul refers to the zones within the larger public school district his students left when they departed

the traditional public schools they previously attended for Success Academy. Zoning has a huge impact on the schools available to students. While parents of more affluent means can afford to strategically move into a neighborhood based on the best schools available, poor families are often limited to areas where they can afford housing, thereby limiting those options. Success Academy is in essence a 21st century segregated school. As such, the silence of race in the stories of student and parent participants is further highlighted.

The teacher participants in this research study do not share the race of the student or parent participants so their focus on race is noteworthy despite the silence in the stories of the other participants. One teacher thought that students have a good social relationship with each other because they are of the same race. Of course this is not necessarily true. People of the same race don't always get along with each other but for the most part, students at Success Academy report they get along well, their parents concur, and during the few months that I was in and out of the school, I agree as well. Aside from student relations though, teachers reflected on how race has influenced their teaching of the student participants.

When questioned about how race has influenced their experiences as a teacher and/or influenced their teaching, a divergence in responses among the teachers emerged. Rebecca acknowledges, "I am able to relate to the needs of my students," while Paul cites, "There have been some cultural challenges in reaching my students." Ramona discloses how the difference in race influences her teaching as she shares, "I try to connect more with my students because they are of a different race than I am. I try to incorporate more ethnically diverse texts and stories that my students can connect to

more often.” Teachers’ acknowledgement of race and differences and utilizing those differences to support students is expected. However, the research doesn’t necessarily affirm that teachers are well prepared to teach disadvantaged Black middle school students.

Teacher preparation programs are not keeping up with the need to equip teachers to meet the diverse students they must be prepared to teach (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lashley, Cooper, McCall, Yeager, & Ricci, 2009; Milner & Howard, 2013). Paul and Rebecca acknowledged lack of teacher preparation when placed in very challenging classes in their prior teaching experiences in traditional public schools. Conversely, Success Academy also has a challenging population of students as evidenced by the school’s end of grade tests performance.

The fact that the teacher participants are of a different race than the students is not significant to warrant examination as to the teacher’s race contributing to student success or lack thereof. Success Academy has a large population of Black teachers but the research does not indicate that students having teachers of the same race is preferable to having teachers of a different race. Students do not necessarily perform better or worse academically because they have a teacher of the same race as them (Banerjee, 2013; Dee, 2004; McGrady & Reynolds, 2012). Figure 8 presents the barriers to the student participants’ success from the lens of CRT.



Figure 8. CRT Focus on Barriers to Disadvantaged Black Middle School Student Success.

The barriers represented in Figure 8 are barriers that are predominantly political. However, there are other barriers that also have influence on student performance. Sometimes Black students and especially Black boys consider it uncool to be smart or into school (Akom, 2008; Fordham, & Ogbu, 1986; Goff, Martin, & Thomas, 2007; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). RJ, in particular experienced this need to be cool in traditional public schools. It wasn't until he transferred to Success Academy that he developed the confidence to focus more on school and ignore those negative influences.

A question about why the student participants in this case study were motivated to focus on school and their learning despite their socioeconomic status, the stereotypes of being a disadvantaged Black youth and the milieu of their communities, these students

wanted to learn and succeed. They knew and understood the value in their education for their future and were serious about what their education meant to them. There is no definitive answer to this question, yet my belief is that all of the instructional, organizational, social, cultural, parental, and racial attributes that surround these students have contributed to their motivation to learn. This is especially profound during their adolescent years and is no small feat for middle school students of any race or socioeconomic status.

This section examined race and its absence from the student and parent participant stories. However, the teacher participant acknowledgements of their perceptions on race and its influence on the educational experiences of the student participants were reviewed. The next section will summarize Chapter VI and provide a preview of Chapter VII.

Summary

Chapter VI presented the data analysis process through the examination and identification of major topics to be explored as a result of identifying and consolidating subtopics into major topics by data sets. I approached the data with the conceptual framework and critical race theory as lenses to analyze the data resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of the research participants on the factors that positively or negatively impacted the student participants' educational experiences.

While examining the research data collected in comparison to the research questions employed for this research study, much has been learned about the

disadvantaged Black middle school student participants attending Success Academy.

The research questions that anchored this study are reiterated:

1. What factors positively and negatively influence the educational experiences of the disadvantaged Black middle school students in this case study?
2. What instructional, organizational, social, or cultural attributes motivate the disadvantaged Black middle school student participants to invest in their academic future when enrolled in their current charter school?

CRT theorists report that educators often approach disadvantaged youth from a deficit mindset and teacher participants in this case study exhibited some signs of deficit thinking through their stories about the student participants. However, the student and parent participants in this research study did not perceive themselves from a deficit mentality, but rather had very strong beliefs about schools, what works, and what doesn't. The research participants were actively engaged in their learning and had specific thoughts about the positive and negative factors influencing their academic achievement and educational experiences. From class size to student and principal behaviors, students and parents had definitive thoughts about the attributes of schools and how these influence academic achievement and education.

The student and parent participants in this case study suggest that the instructional factors that positively influenced their academic achievement and educational experiences include sound teaching and learning. Students and parents were knowledgeable about the instructional attributes of schools and what good teaching and learning looks like from their perspective. They also candidly shared if they were the

recipients of good teaching and learning at the traditional public schools they previously attended and at Success Academy. Conversely, the student participants imply that teachers that don't allow them to enrich their skill set or who repeatedly review information they've already learned have negatively impacted their academic achievement. Moreover, busywork was a negative element of school in the traditional public schools they left and they strongly considered busywork something teachers should avoid at all costs. Student participants would also say that teachers who care and use sound teaching techniques to ensure they learn the content to be prepared for the next grade level have positively motivated them to be invested in their learning.

The student, parent, and teacher participants had strong opinions and perceptions about the organizational attributes that positively influence students' overall success. They expressed the belief that small school settings and small class size have positively influenced their learning because teachers have more time to work with students individually. Moreover, they have the opportunity to interact with their teachers enough that their teachers can write letters of recommendation for them when they begin the process of applying to high school. The ability to have recommendations as part of their goals for transitioning to high school is a positive organizational characteristic that motivates the student participants to be fully vested in their educational pursuits because they value their options for high school as was discussed in great detail during the focus group session.

The social influence of schools that student, teacher, and parent case study participants perceive as positive influences on academic achievement include principal

behaviors that set a no tolerance expectation for student behavior and who address issues like bullying quickly and effectively. Bullying was one of the more negative aspects of school that the student participants discussed. Preventing pervasive bullying behavior would be an outcome the student participants would deem as most influential regarding academic achievement. A key factor that enabled students to be more engaged in their education at Success Academy than at the traditional public schools they abandoned is that with the exception of Heaven, the student participants didn't express that they experience bullying at Success. If they do have a problem, they believe Principal Clark will take care of it. This too was an important attribute to their parents.

The investment in their academic future the student participants exhibited is extraordinary among typical middle school students. They elaborated on the importance of school culture and how schools manage the transition of new or transfer students. School culture was an important attribute of schools that positively influenced their academic achievement because their peer group is focused on what is required of them to go to the next level and what to do to accomplish their goals. The student participants in this case study all transferred from traditional public schools to Success Academy and that transition has obviously been a positive one. This is especially important during the important middle school years when students typically grapple with issues surrounding their identity, where they fit in socially, and are adapting to the developmental and physical changes they experience.

The student and parent participants perceive that Success Academy is superior to the traditional public schools they left and that the instructional, organizational, social,

and cultural attributes of Success Academy are creating a sound instructional opportunity for students to attain academic success. Chapter VI presented the data analysis from the student, parent, and teacher participants' perception in their own voices. Chapter VII begins the discussion of the research findings by addressing each of the first three themes in detail.

CHAPTER VII

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Interpreting the data is a process through which the researcher attempts to glean the most significant features of the research data to co-construct meaning out of what was learned. In essence, the research findings answer the “so what” question. What this research study means for the student participants and how the knowledge garnered can be applied to schools, the body of research, and to policymakers and researchers will be discussed.

The vast amount of data analyzed is being reduced to a small area of focus. Therefore, it does not adequately or fully represent the educational experiences of the disadvantaged Black middle school student participants in this case study. The following interpretations are an attempt to communicate stories that have not been told in hopes of shedding more light on the issues and plight of the case study participants who seek educational experiences that will equip them for the future despite the obstacles they may face. The next section will focus on the purpose of schools from the perspective of the participants.

The Purpose of Schools

The purpose of schools at face value seems simple. Schools are presumed to educate young people and prepare them for life in the future—to equip students with the necessary skills to be college and career ready. College and career readiness is a big

undertaking but one that is essential if we hope to prepare all students to be globally competitive and to operate in a world that is globally interdependent. In order to deliver on the expectations of college and career readiness for all, we must first understand what college and career readiness means within the instructional attribute of high quality teaching and learning.

High Quality Teaching and Learning

Anyone invested in the future of America must be concerned about education. In order to prepare a highly skilled workforce to move our country into the 21st century, we must question education as we know it and figure out ways to make educational achievement a right and promise for all U.S. citizens. Historically, schooling in the U.S. involved teachers as the imparters of knowledge and students as sponges soaking that knowledge up. Today, in many schools across the U.S. and in North Carolina, education generally consists of students spending a pre-determined amount of time in a classroom with an established group of peers and a teacher, who if they are lucky provides an opportunity for the student to learn the established curriculum, to explore, grow, and develop academically, socially, physically, and emotionally. Despite this stark reality, the student participants in this case study expect more.

The classrooms at Success Academy are like many I just mentioned. Yet, the school is unlike the average school. Students disclosed that their teachers don't give them busywork as they've had in the past. They don't get packets of review worksheets but they also didn't say they have engaging conversations or projects. They mentioned that their teachers help them "get it", the content. However, one of the teachers, Ramona

shared that her students want to do well and try their hardest when she gives them strategies and techniques to do so. These descriptions sound a lot like the typical sit and get teaching style. Perhaps this is what students like because they operate effectively within that paradigm and their grades are okay by their standards. However, their paradigm needs to shift to more higher order thinking and learning activities in order for them to advance academically to meet their goals of succeeding in high school and beyond.

Success Academy supports students with great needs due to the socioeconomic status of their families and the high poverty nature of their school. With 83% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, Success Academy educators must do more with less due to a lack of adequate resources. According to the North Carolina Report Card (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2015) and the NC READY Accountability model (North Carolina Public Schools, 2013), Success Academy fails to provide students with the high quality teaching and learning that would enable them to achieve better scores on their end of grade tests. Moreover, this means they are not delivering on the expectations of the student participants who so definitively expressed that they need high quality teaching and learning to prepare them for their immediate future goals, high school and beyond.

To parents, high quality teaching is about meeting the student's needs. Mary elaborates when asked what she'd like to share with the teachers or principals at her child's previous schools, Mary responds, "Learn how to differentiate instruction and tasks for students to better meet the child's needs." RJ, as mentioned in Chapter V,

expressed the significance of learning and gaining needed skills. He knows that if he doesn't learn he could end up homeless, hopeless, and ultimately with his dramatic declaration, die.

While RJ and the other student participants won't physically die as a result of not learning at high levels, their dreams for a bright future may surely be extinguished. This critical understanding of the student participants' expectations is vital for their schools to get it right. The expectations for high quality teaching and learning must include opportunities to read, write, think, and collaborate on a daily basis, to research and present, solve real world problems, use technology and 21st century tools, use higher order thinking skills and promote problem-based learning, and develop an extensive understanding of self in relation to and acceptance of others. These are minimum requirements to ensure students are ready for college, careers, and for life. Failure to provide these minimum standards for all students is in essence educational malpractice.

Re-segregated schools, under the guise of school choice, stifle students' abilities to grapple with differences and to work productively with other students who don't look just like them. Furthermore, if we agree with Perrone (1991) that children are the future we must prepare them for the world they will enter—a world plagued by poverty, racial tension, religious conflicts, environmental concerns, a global economy, war, and disease. These problems will not be resolved by students' ability to solve multiple-choice questions on a high stakes test, yet they must have the skills to do so. In order to prepare students to become productive citizens, problem solvers, conservationists, and supporters of democracy and social justice, our society must commit to educating all students to be

prepared for college and careers so the exciting things the world has to offer—life, love, families, careers, faith, and giving back to the community can be realized. The student participants' in this case study think Success Academy is preparing them for success according to these standards. However, the students' performance on their end of grade tests may prove otherwise.

To equip students with the knowledge and skill set to be successful is a critical element of any school and is a measure of teacher and school success as indicated by standardized testing. Parents, community stakeholders, and business leaders expect schools to develop a highly skilled workforce to attract business and industry so attention to the written, taught, and tested curriculum is vital. This section has addressed the importance of high quality teaching and learning for all students as an expectation not only by the student participants and parents but also by community stakeholders and business leaders.

High Student Performance

The academic performance of the student participants was analyzed in Chapter V and Appendix C provided the net change in their EOG scores and their grades. There was an obvious disconnect between the student and parent participants' thoughts about academic achievement gains since transferring to Success Academy. Student and parents alike reported improved academic performance since attending Success. Yet, despite these claims, for the students with data available, only one student, Jaylen saw any improvement on the EOG over all prior years. She improved one level in math but despite this improvement, she was not proficient in reading or math and has not been for

the past two years. In fact, none of the six students the researcher had data for were proficient in math over the past two years and only two of the six were proficient in reading.

To expect the student participants with these EOG results to be able to complete globally and have the skills needed to be prepared for college, careers, and life is doubtful. Minimally, to be prepared to go to the high school of their choice, a focus that the student participants conversed so much about in the focus group session is most likely unrealistic. Ironically, neither the student participants nor their parents mentioned EOGs as a concern. Additionally, as was previously stated in Chapter V, only one teacher, Paul acknowledged shortcomings with student performance. The observation that neither student participants nor their parents realize they have this barrier to achieving their short and long term goals is very disheartening.

None of the students or parents acknowledged the stark reality that the end of grade test scores for Success Academy are about the same as those from neighboring traditional public middle schools. While test scores are certainly not the total function of schools or the total representation for what makes a quality school, they are the accepted means of measuring not only student performance but also school quality. Additionally, they are currently the only means of determining teacher and school accountability and researchers suggest the effects of statewide accountability programs are successful in accomplishing this task, even with minority groups (Chubb & Loveless, 2002).

For some of the student participants that attend Success Academy, it is obviously not about the end of grade tests. It is about attending a school where they feel safe, cared

for, and where they believe the teachers are doing everything possible to teach them. It is also about where they play sports, as was the case with Mo. Neither Mo, nor his mother mentioned a concern about EOGs or talked extensively about the teaching and learning at the school because I suspect Mo's primary purpose for attending Success Academy is access to the soccer program. Moreover, while Mo's EOG data were unavailable due to an incomplete cumulative record, I cogitate he is performing well from the discussion about his advanced math classes and his AIG status. Therefore, Mo is at an advantage over the other student participants.

Even with Mo's intellectual ability to be in advanced math classes that he shared were based on EOG scores, he cannot afford to miss out on high quality teaching and learning on a daily basis, nor can the rest of the student participants. If EOGs are a predictor of future success and preparation for the next grade level, the lack of progress on EOGs by the student participants should be closely scrutinized. The student participants are very knowledgeable about their options for high school and want to exercise the opportunity to choose the high school of their choice, as discussed in Chapter V. In order for them to do so, they will need their academic transcript to demonstrate readiness for high school to keep all available options open to them. My concern is that they will be surprised when they do not get into the schools of their choice. When the student participants' applications are reviewed next to students with higher EOG scores and higher grades, the choice of who to admit may easily be determined.

I was privy to know that Mo's sister attends an academy high school with a focus on medicine and engineering. She is pursuing medicine. Therefore, I make the

supposition that Mo will be able to attend the school of his choice based on his sister's acquisition of hers, and him being AIG, but I am not sure any of the other student participants will have as many options.

In a review of John Ogbu's study about the achievement gap between White and Black students, Comeaux and Jayakumar (2007) critically analyze Ogbu's dispositions about Black students having responsibility for their own academic shortcomings. Ogbu dismisses educational, social, or political factors and blames Black students for bringing negative community behaviors into schools which corrupt their ability to be engaged in school and perform up to their academic potential. Comeaux and Jayakumar (2007) state,

Ogbu notes that 'Shaker Black students had very high academic aspirations but, as was evident in their record of performance, it was not clear that they know how to realize [their college or career] aspirations...Black students did not understand the connection between their present schooling, higher education, and future adult career or professions.' (para. 13)

The student participants and parents in the current study have a different focus on what constitutes academic improvement. Thus, there may be a disconnect between their current academic performance and their aspirant goals. I want to be clear that I do not subscribe to Ogbu's deficit thinking. However, I am concerned that since all of the parents reported their child had improved since attending Success Academy, I infer that the parents were referring to the students' grades. Yet, even the student participants' grades have not improved as much as they need to in order to increase my belief that students are prepared for the next grade span, college, or careers. Appendix C provides

more details on the net changes in students' grades over four years. As was discussed in detail in Chapter V, there has been some positive change with regard to grades. The question their improvement in grades creates is—if their grades are improving, why aren't their EOG scores also improving?

The Opportunity to Choose

As previously noted, all student participants previously attended traditional public schools and exercised the opportunity to choose Success Academy as their instructional delivery setting. Parents chose what they perceived was the best school for their children. Over the course of this research study, however, I have come to question whether Black parents are actually exercising their opportunity to choose or are having the choice made for them because of the institutional racism that exists in our school districts, state, and country.

Theoretically, the parent participants exercised their opportunity to choose. However, the high poverty communities they live in limited their choices. As Paul reflected, the student participants are zoned for schools, traditional public schools, and charter schools that are underperforming. As I aforementioned, the neighboring traditional public middle schools' EOG performance mirrors that of Success Academy. Therefore, the student participants have no substantive options.

They do not have the choice to enroll in a school that is high performing, that has adequate resources, and that is full of highly qualified teachers to help them progress and reach their goals. Therefore, they are pigeon holed into making a choice that has already been made for them by the large local school district that determines the school zones and

by the state of North Carolina that approves charters and funds all of the public schools in North Carolina.

The inequity in funding was blatantly obvious as I spent time at Success Academy. The most serious inequity observed was the media center. The media center is supposed to be the hub of the school. It is the epicenter of learning, researching, and exploring information using 21st century tools. Yet, the media center was an extremely small space that wasn't staffed. I used the space on several occasions to conduct interviews and there was only one table with chairs in the room. Most often, when the room was occupied, it was being used for testing a student or a staff member was using the phone because the desk in the media center, which was more like an office space, had a phone with an outside line.

This type of disparity does not support the purpose of schools. It is reminiscent of what Black civil rights leaders fought for with *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and the doctrine of "separate but equal." Success Academy is 94% Black and the lack of resources in comparison to typical traditional public schools parallels the unequal conditions of segregated schools. In the 21st century, unequal access to educational resources for the student participants depending on their school to educate them is fundamentally, morally, and ethically wrong. Louise provides additional support when asked about the positive experiences Mo had at his previous schools. She explains, "When you are with the public schools there are opportunities for other programs. Summer arts institute he was involved in for a number of years. That is specific to [traditional public school district] and that was pretty cool."

I contend another purpose of schools is to provide equal access to education to prepare all students to be socially responsible citizens. With that contention, I denote we are failing. We as educators, as society, and as policymakers are failing not just the research study participants or the students that attend Success Academy. We are failing any student who has no other option but to choose between schools that are mostly all underperforming because that is the zone the student happens to live in. The student participants deserve better and want better.

This section has addressed the purpose of schools to educate all students. It further encapsulates that the purpose of today's schools are to equip students to deal with some wicked problems for which they will need creative minds and innovative cognitive processes to solve. The development of these skills will require high quality teaching and learning happen on a daily basis to push students to achieve. Currently, the student participants' EOG scores do not indicate this is happening regularly and routinely. Despite the fact that the student participants entered Success Academy behind, they must begin to build their proficiency on their EOGs as well as improve their grades in order to realize their dreams of attending the high school of their choice and having a bright future. The next section will explore the understood value of education by the participants in this research study.

The Understood Value of Education

The research study participants placed a huge value on their education. They disclosed how important it was to them as the key to their future. They also discussed the importance of their being able to attend the high school of their choice. By value, I mean

the inherent worth of education and the influence that worth has on students' educational and future experiences. Furthermore, the student participants' exemplified the value placed on education so much they invest in their own education. The students try to do their best in school, participate in extracurricular activities that will help them develop skills to be successful, and behave appropriately so teachers will write them letters of recommendation for high school.

Parents expressed their desire to ensure their children got a good education. Karen stated she wanted to make sure her daughter, Darkwing, had the skills to be a CEO, not the only option of working at McDonalds. She wanted the school to ensure her child had the ability to navigate and make that decision without it being made for her, and as a parent, Karen's expectation is reasonable.

Transitioning between Schools

The concept of transition was ever present in the student participant dialogue. All student participants transferred from a traditional public school to Success Academy and had thoughts and impressions about how schools should transition students to ensure they were successful. Student participants obviously had value in education because they and their parents seemed to take the decision to leave traditional public schools for Success Academy seriously.

The student participants also placed value on the transition to high school. During the focus group session, the majority of time was spent discussing high school options and what they would need to do to be able to attend the high school of their choice. They had paid attention when friends and family members made the transition to high school

and they too wanted to make a successful transition, so much so they expressed that their behavior had to be good so teachers would write them a letter of recommendation.

Whether this has been stressed at home or at school, I could not tell, but the students had internalized this requirement for good behavior. Parents did not discuss the transition to high school. Therefore, I assumed that teachers had communicated the importance of being able to write letters of recommendation as a tactic for better behavior. If so, it worked. Student behavior was very good, and the students did not appreciate it when it wasn't with other students. Even Carmen complained when hearing a student misbehaving in the hallway during her interview.

As previously noted, Joshua was excused from the focus group because he continually disturbed the group. The group tried to manage his behavior by encouraging him to behave. When that didn't work and the group members appeared exasperated, I asked Joshua to make a decision about whether he would stop disturbing the group or be excused and he chose to be excused. Additionally, the group members didn't respond well to Carmen when she shared her story about the fights at her previous traditional public schools and her involvement. It was obvious Carmen was sharing her story to impress the other participants. But I could tell by their body language and eye signals to each other that they weren't amused by this inappropriate behavior.

The parent participants also seemed to value education with the investment they made to send their children to Success Academy. As previously discussed, the EOG scores and the demographics of Success Academy are similar to those of the neighboring public middle schools. Moreover, these traditional public middle schools provide more

options for lunch in a traditional cafeteria, have larger school campuses, likely more resources through state and federal funding, and they also provide free and public transportation daily. Paul addressed this by pointing out that Success parents are slightly more invested in their children's education because they must provide transportation. Likewise, the students too mentioned the investment in transportation. They recognized that not all parents are financially able to do this, nor should they have to. A free, public, and equitable education should be a right that all children and their parents can depend on in the U.S. It should not be dependent upon the parent's ability to provide transportation, afford a uniform, or live in a low poverty neighborhood. All means all and should be treated as such with educational and social policies that make it a reality.

Despite the lack of resources, the comparable test scores, and the investment in transportation, the small group of parent participants and all of the other parents at Success Academy have determined it is worthwhile for them to fund their children's transportation and choose to attend a charter school with far less resources than send their children to a neighboring traditional public school that provides free transportation and has more resources due to greater state allotments. This level of commitment on the part of the parents of Success Academy is certainly an interesting conundrum, especially since an overwhelming majority of students (83%) qualify for free and reduced lunch. This investment must come at a huge sacrifice.

The value on education exhibited may be due in part because the majority of the parent participants have achieved some post-secondary education. While most of the parents work in blue-collar positions, they want more for their children. The student

participants all talked about their parents and their families with a sense of pride. They inevitably smiled when discussing their families with the exception of Carmen and Joshua who spoke of their families with more factual statements and less emotional response.

There was also evidence of the value placed on education by the parent participants agreeing to participate and allow their children to participate in the research study. Their willingness to allow me to interview their students, as well as five parents who agreed to be interviewed, is tremendous. Moreover, the parents expressed great interest in the research study and were interested in the outcomes.

This response may be attributed to the participant pool created by Principal Clark. However, of the initial 17 in the participant pool, only ten agreed. As noted, one student moved and nine participated for approximately 53% of the student participant pool. Likewise, six parents originally agreed to be interviewed but due to repeated scheduling conflicts, five of the nine parents were interviewed or 55% of the parents. Finally, three of the eight teachers recruited participated for approximately 38% teacher participation.

I was very pleased with the student and parent participation rates but I was disappointed about the teacher participation rates. I thought teachers would be more inclined to participate due to their personal value of education. However, the response was not as good as the student and parent response. Moreover, the majority of teachers at Success Academy are Black, yet no Black teachers participated in the research study. I have tried to figure out a theory for this but cannot. As an educator, I understand the value placed on time also. During the teacher recruitment phase, I shared with teachers

that the Google form questionnaire was projected to take one hour. Perhaps the length of the questionnaire was a deterrent. Perhaps other teachers might have participated if I had conducted individual interviews in person.

The understood value of education the participants shared is not abnormal. Scholars have also noted the value on education by Black parents. Their research indicates that often Black parents place a high value on education and share these values with their children as a result of familial hopes and dreams of the next generation avoiding the struggles of the parent's generation (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 2002; Klineberg, 2013). Klineberg (2013) reports that Blacks were more likely than other races to think a post-secondary education was valuable. He further states, "The educational disparities have much more to do with resources and income inequalities than with any presumed differences in aspirations or values" (para. 4). Clearly the research participants in this study have high aspirations and are doing their best to put themselves in a position to realize their dreams. It is up to schools to ensure they get there.

Class Size

The participants in this research study all saw the benefits of smaller class size and a smaller school setting. They discussed the benefit of getting one-on-one help, as in the case with Carmen because of her IEP. But also, they mentioned the benefits of being able to get more attention from the teacher. Specifically, students wanted the teachers to know them well so they can understand the curriculum and write a letter of recommendation for them. Paul shared that he sought out Success Academy because of the smaller class size and smaller school. Because he felt underprepared to teach the

students he taught in traditional public schools, he thought a smaller school environment might be a reason to prevent him from leaving the classroom and for him to be successful as a teacher.

In addition to the one-on-one help, teachers share that students are offered tutoring on Saturday mornings. This is an additional remediation service that may be difficult for larger schools or traditional public schools to offer. Neither students nor their parents mentioned this option. Additionally, Heaven's mom, Jane felt that the teachers at Success were working with her and were building her self-esteem. Mary also mentioned this about Joshua and Louise shared Mo was building his self-confidence. These parents felt the smaller school setting was a place where individual student needs could be met.

Bianca shared that she was afraid to go to public school because of the large numbers of kids. This is a significant revelation since Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder (2001) purport that students who attend larger high schools tend to be less engaged in school. Success Academy is indeed a small school environment with small class size. It touts a 13 to 1 teacher to student ratio. This is unheard of in traditional public schools. Nevertheless, with this teacher to student ratio, small class size and small school size, a further inquiry into why test scores aren't better is warranted.

Investment in smaller class size in the elementary grades could help students who come from homes where school preparedness is low to gain the necessary skills they need to catch up to other students from less deprived backgrounds. Perhaps this early investment could preclude the need for future investments in remediation and retention as

planned for by the North Carolina's current Read to Achieve program that retains third grade students if they are not proficient on end of grade tests at the end of their third grade year. Reforms including funding for pre-kindergarten programs and smaller class size have shown beneficial for less advantaged students (Chubb & Loveless, 2002).

Carter and Welner (2013) summarize the overwhelming need for educational excellence and equality:

Children who have special needs, are growing up in poverty, belong to a racial or ethnic minority groups, or are English language learners will not progress adequately unless we devote additional resources and expertise to ensuring equal opportunity for all.

The common good for our nation depends on good schools and teachers for all students. We have the technical knowledge to do so. Now is the time to dispel the myths, face the evidence, and pursue the right strategies. (p. 192)

Therefore, reallocating existing educational funding and purposing additional funding for high quality teaching and learning to happen in every classroom should be an inalienable right for all students regardless of where they are born or into what family. This subsection addressed the value placed on small class and school size by study participants. Yet, despite the small size and increased teacher interaction, the test scores of student participants are still lacking.

Impressions about School Quality

The discussion about school quality was a recurring topic throughout the data. Students and parents both felt a sense of superiority about attending Success Academy. In fact, the implication was that students in traditional public schools were stuck there because they have no other options since their parents are unable to provide one for them.

Additionally, parents made the choice to send their children to Success Academy influenced partly by terrible memories of things that had happened to their children in the past. The memories discussed in Chapter V specifically by Mary and Louise are awful and should never happen to any child. For these reasons I think parents overlook some of the other aspects that they would prefer to be different about Success Academy, like having greater access to resources and extracurricular activities because some of the experiences their children had prior to Success were so bad.

In this era of accountability and choice, schools must be prepared to compete. Parents have more information about schools than they have ever had before with a click of a button. Therefore, it is up to schools to market themselves well and have a plan for how they will maintain a strong sense of positive culture and climate when visitors come to the school. Additionally, schools cannot ever discount the power of social media and the Internet when it comes to accessibility of information.

Many schools are moving towards having budget allocations for marketing and school website management. Schools are also using social media tools like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn to market themselves and keep parents abreast of news and information. Smaller schools with limited resources may not have the budget to do this type of whole scale marketing. Success Academy does not have an elaborate website, but they have information available to the public. When perusing their website, I would like to know more but the school is making an effort to showcase positive elements of the school. The school also has a Facebook page. The Facebook page is underdeveloped at this point, but some parents have made very positive comments about the school on the

page. The impressions of parents and students as consumers of educational services is a new concept with the addition of new service delivery options in North Carolina, but is a vital element that schools cannot afford to ignore.

Smaller schools with fewer resources have to be creative on ways to use available resources to accommodate their needs. Furthermore, if they do not have the resources to invest in webpage management and social media, they must rely on word of mouth. Therefore, the experiences students have on a daily basis must be good experiences to ensure the impressions that current and future stakeholders have about the school is a positive one. The parent participants at Success Academy have great overall impressions of the school and what they are doing to benefit students. They believe the school has made their children's educational experiences better. The student participants have a feeling of superiority over the traditional public school students they left. They are enamored with their school and they too believe they are getting the most out of their educational experiences.

This section has examined the findings regarding the understood value the participants placed on education as a key to their future. Schools provide opportunities for students to learn, grow, and develop in an environment that is safe and supportive. The next section will focus on the needs of students in schools based upon the case study participants' perceptions. These perceptions will illuminate what the participants say students need from schools.

Needs of Students in Schools

The participants in this case study indicated their needs in school. They identified several attributes they deem necessary in order for them to be invested in their education. From their lived experiences they explain these needs and how they impact their educational experiences.

Schools need to employ strategies that address their students' needs in a fair and consistent manner. Schools need to meet the purpose of schools and honor the value on education the student and parent participants hold as was discussed in the previous section. Also, schools need to serve their student populations by being responsive to their needs of a learning environment that enables them to learn with adequate challenge and support. Especially in middle school where students are experiencing all of the changes that occur developmentally, schools need to acknowledge students' desire to voice their thoughts and have their voices heard. Moreover, schools need a variety of instructional, organizational, social, and cultural aspects to guide their decision-making, their mission, vision, and planning goals. Not only do schools need to be responsive for student success, but also they need to be accountable to all stakeholders.

Responsive Principal Behaviors

Oftentimes middle school students struggle with the myriad of academic, social, interpersonal, emotional, physical, and environmental decisions they must make and without strong parental, school, and community influences students may find themselves on the wrong path and make decisions that can negatively influence their success in high school. In fact, dropouts don't typically originate in high school. Most often they begin in

elementary school and are strengthened in middle school when students at-risk of failure begin to disengage from school.

I spent a period of three months in and out of Success Academy observing the student participants, their fellow students, teachers, and other staff members of the school. During this time period, I observed students who were functioning effectively in a structured, yet nurturing school environment. Students freely interacted with themselves and their teachers, as well as with Principal Clark. Student behavior was typical adolescent behavior. However, there was a sense of restraint exhibited from students and they were extremely well behaved.

There were few incidents of misbehavior from the student participants that resulted in reprimand or disciplinary action. Exceptions to this were when I came to observe and interview Carmen and she was suspended from school. Additionally, Joshua had to be excused from the focus group session for continuously disrupting the group. In this instance, students took it upon themselves to ask him to behave, yet finally I excused him because he would not or could not gain the self-control needed to participate in the group session without causing further disruption.

The student participants in this case study spoke about their belief that Principal Clark would take care of problems with bullying. One of the students expressed concerns about bullying that were illuminated in Chapter IV. Heaven was still experiencing bullying at Success but she and her mom felt the school was handling it appropriately and that she was building a more positive self-esteem as a result of her interactions at school.

Student participants felt safe at school and one of the most important attributes of a successful school is that it is safe and orderly. Students cannot function in a chaotic environment where there is uncertainty about what will happen next. Students at Success Academy don't have that fear. Moreover, as was discussed in Chapter VI, teachers apparently do a great job of shielding student participants from any stress they experience as a result of poor planning because none of the students or parents expressed concerns about the school having a stressful environment.

Principal Clark appeared to be a responsive and approachable leader with regards to student, parent, and staff interaction along with maintaining discipline, expectations for appropriate behavior and maintaining an inclusive climate in the school where ideas matter and all stakeholders are involved and contribute to the decision making processes. This responsiveness apparently carries over to the teachers as well because students shared that they feel comfortable asking questions and getting help from their teachers. I observed positive student and staff interactions during my time at Success and think the staff genuinely wishes to be responsive to student needs. I would challenge, however, that in order to be most responsive to student needs, there should be an examination of instructional practices in the school.

When examining the schools' EOG results over the past six years, the dip in scores occurred simultaneously with the implementation of the common core curriculum. It is entirely possible that teachers have not adjusted their teaching style and practices to meet the more rigorous standards of the common core. If teachers have not adjusted instructionally, students are not prepared for the EOGs they are required to take.

Additionally, Louise mentioned that teachers aren't stressed about the common core like teachers in public schools. It is not desirable to be stressed about the tests but a sense of urgency is pertinent.

Examination into the instructional practices coupled with professional development and focused classroom walk-throughs by Principal Clark could completely change the instructional dynamics of the school and thereby increase student achievement on the EOGs. Subsequently, principals who were actively engaged in monitoring classroom instruction were more highly regarded and student achievement was higher (Downey, Steffy, Poston, & English, 2009). It is not just about increasing EOG scores but it is also about challenging students to meet the higher standards with rigorous thought processes and learning activities designed to help them develop the skills they will need to succeed in college and careers. If the purpose of schools is to educate students, the responsive principal and school seeks to continually adapt and change to be responsive to student needs and instructional demands.

Parent and Teacher Interactions

Many educational leaders wrestle with issues surrounding parent involvement in schools. Historically, parent involvement has been misunderstood as a means to an end for the sole purpose of improving student achievement (Auerbach, 2010). However, more research points to the need for school leaders to examine their own beliefs, dispositions, and biases in order to develop strategies to engage parents in supporting and enhancing socially just and relevant schools where a climate of inclusiveness exists for all students and their families. Moreover,

Parents are more likely to be involved in education—and students are more likely to achieve at higher levels—when there are strong policies for partnership, when teachers and schools invite participation in various ways, when schools plan comprehensive activities, and when parents see their role as direct involvement. (Auerbach, 2010, p. 759)

Parent involvement in school is an important need for students and for schools alike. Schools need parents to be involved and to interact with teachers and administrators on behalf of their child's education and research suggests that students benefit academically when parents do (Auerbach, 2010). Principal Clark and her staff maintaining and open, welcoming, inviting and inclusive atmosphere at the school encourage and supports parent involvement. Reitzug and Cross (1995) add credence to this inclusion mindset with their work on Site Based Management (SBM). Reitzug and Cross (1995) posit,

Site-based management (SBM) is grounded in assumptions that (a) decisions made at schools are likely to be more responsive to specific, individual school contexts than to standardized decisions made at the district level and mandated for individual schools; (b) teachers, parents, and students are more likely to respond positively to decisions that they have been involved in making than to those made by individuals at higher levels of the organizational hierarchy; and (c) democratic governance is more moral and humanistic than autocratic or dictatorial forms of governance. (p. 329)

In order to create a school environment in which SBM is the norm, there must be value in the ideas and knowledge represented by the entire school community. At Success Academy, the research participants were afforded an opportunity to share their thoughts candidly about the organizational features of their school and identified elements they perceived to be important to the overall organization of the school and to their needs.

Parents genuinely felt connected to the school and that their students are better for their connection to Success Academy.

I would be remiss without a reflection on the deficit thinking that was expressed by the teacher participants. The deficit thinking is an unacceptable behavior that needs correction. The parent participants were actively engaged in their children's educations. They knew what was going on in the school; they contacted teachers, and wanted more communication from teachers about what was going on with their children. Teachers must stop and view things from other perspectives than their middle class background. They must also be willing to take a step back and look through another's lens for introspection. Moreover, teachers must identify the cultural capital that students bring to school and to develop "sociocultural competence" (Milner & Lomotey, 2013, p. 207) to responsively and inclusively teach students in urban schools. Caring relationships are a need that is essential according to study participants.

Caring Relationships

Zig Ziglar has been quoted to say, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care . . . about them!" In order to establish highly effective relationships with students, teachers must show students they care. Teachers at Success Academy say they do this by building trust and rapport with students. They establish rules and procedures but also attempt to understand where their students from a cultural perspective.

Caring relationships need to be nurtured among all stakeholders. Students need to have care and concern for each other to eliminate negative student behaviors like

bullying. Moreover, Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder (2001) report that schools “shape the social development of students by organizing peer relations” (p. 319) and that through this shaping of relationships, schools also help to promote school engagement and thereby, academic achievement. Therefore, investment to ensure that students have developmentally appropriate relationships with their peers is an important function of schools to promote social competence (Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994). This is especially important during the middle school years.

Not only are student’s peer relationships important but teachers also need to have caring relationships with students in order to facilitate open and honest dialogue. Especially during the middle school years when students don’t know where they fit in, they must have a safe and caring environment to learn. This is the result of the establishment of relationships built on genuine trust and mutual respect. Furthermore, researchers have documented the importance of student to teacher relationships as being another vital component to decrease the achievement gap and to increase student engagement and academic achievement (Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994; Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001).

The parent participants expressed a sincere belief that they have a family atmosphere at Success Academy. They talked about the fact that the teachers know their children well, know their families, and seem invested in them as a family unit, not just their student. This type of inclusiveness that was discussed in the previous section on parent and teacher interaction is also relevant to parents who may not feel comfortable in the school environment due to their own prior experiences in school. Acknowledgement

that parents bring knowledge about their child, care, and concern to the table enables the doors of communication to remain open for continued dialogue.

Teachers in schools with large populations of disadvantaged youth need to establish caring relationships in order to be able to deliver the content. Most often you have to reach a child before you can teach them. Warren cites, “. . . Schools cannot teach children well if teachers lack an understanding of their students’ cultures and lives, and if they lack meaningful relationships with their families” (p. 134). Subsequently, Haberman (1995) states,

. . . Many teachers fail in high-poverty urban environments because they do not have the ability to connect with students and build relationships with them so that students are willing to participate in learning. In this way, subject matter knowledge is necessary but is insufficient in meeting the needs of students living in urban environments. (as cited by Milner & Lomotey, 2013, p. 204)

Working in a high poverty school is not easy. However, it is documented in the literature that the quality of the relationship between students and their teachers has a significant effect on student’s engagement in school and academic achievement (Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994; Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001). Furthermore, Warren (2005) introduces the need for schools to build social capital based on relationships built on trust to leverage positive outcomes for students. Warren (2005) further states,

Within schools, strong relationships based on trust and cooperation among teachers, principals, parents, and community residents can play an important role in improving schools in several ways. When parents and community members are engaged in the life of the school, they can support teaching and strengthen the environment for learning. (p. 137)

Therefore, having a strong desire to establish and nurture caring relationships will help in the process of educating all students. One can never diminish the power a positive caring adult can have in the life of a student. This subsection has explored caring relationships as a need for students in schools.

The initial findings from this research study were significant to the research participants as they shared their lived experiences around the small urban charter school that linked them all together. The student participants have a lot at stake as they continue their education. Their preparation for high school, college, and careers is on the line.

Their parents, while highly invested in their educations are limited as to the options they can provide given the constraints of the school choice options available. Despite these restrictions, however, the combination of a strong desire to see their children succeed with the resilience and tenacity of these young people is awe-inspiring. The parent and student participants should have knowledge of the academic progress the students are making or the lack thereof so they can further reevaluate their choices. Because they are gaining so much by way of safety, security, and positive self-esteem, along with the family atmosphere of the school, they are solidifying the academic progress for the student participants and for the school as a whole would be a great accomplishment.

The teachers in the research study were attempting to be responsive to the needs of their students. I truly think they were not aware of the deficit thinking they espoused when writing about their students and their parents. However, this thinking may be hampering the students they seek to teach each day.

The principal of Success Academy, Mrs. Clark appeared to be a fearless leader. It will take a lot of courage and resolve to address some of the issues that could be opportunities for improvement for Success Academy. From an intense investigation of the instructional practices of teachers, to continuing a responsive and inclusive stance, to sustaining and nurturing relationships with all stakeholders, there is always work to be done in a school. The work, however daunting, is worthwhile for the beneficiaries, the student participants, richly deserve it.

This research study has been very captivating. Taking a closer look at the lived experiences of the student participants was a venture that added rich data to the research on Black students in North Carolina attending a small urban charter school. The student participants in this study were very forthcoming with their perceptions of what factors positively and negatively influence their educational experiences and the attributes of successful schools and how they spur them to be invested in their education despite the odds against them is inspiring. Additionally, their parents and teachers shed light on their lived experiences by adding their perceptions to the synthesis of data analysis.

The next chapter will address the absence of race as the final theme of the research findings. Because race was not included in the narratives of the student and parent participants and this research study was about the co-construction of knowledge, the researcher's perspectives are included in the next chapter on the absence of race. I add my own perceptions to the dialogue on the absence of race, address implications and for researchers and policymakers, and make final conclusions in Chapter VIII.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ABSENCE OF RACE

When our forefathers and mothers argued for the end of segregated schools and fought for *Brown v Board of Education* (1954), it is doubtful they envisioned the educational landscape of today. Conversely, they would likely be surprised at all the changes brought about by current legislation that created options for charter schools and all of the other educational delivery options currently available. Students have more choices than ever, yet how these choices impact their ability to navigate their futures remains largely unknown.

This case study focused on a small group of student participants who made the choice to leave traditional public schools for a small, high poverty urban charter school. Gaining a better understanding of how this choice has impacted the student participants' educational experiences was the goal of this research. Thus, the student participants', their parents', and their teachers' voices were sought to co-construct meaning out of their lived experiences.

Chapter I focused on the introduction, overview, and organization of this study. It also explained the significance of the study and statement of the problem. Chapter I introduced the research setting and explained several of the key terms to be used during the research study and first introduced the research questions, limitations, and delimitations of the study. Disadvantaged Black middle school students were the

identified group of participants because of the additional challenges that put them at higher risk of being disconnected from and dropping out of school. To gain a comprehensive view of their lived experiences, their parents' and teachers' perceptions were also sought.

Chapter II provided the literature review and examined the history of education in this country and specifically focused on the history of charter schools, their formation in the United States, and specifically in North Carolina. The rocky educational landscape in this country has been rich with controversy and legal decisions impacting who had the right to learn and where that right could be fulfilled. Furthermore, integrated schools were not immune to difficulties amassed by an achievement gap that has plagued American schools for decades.

The differences in educational achievement of Black and White students resulted "so-called" school reform and an additional series of legislative decisions in North Carolina on the basis of giving parents better choices and options for educating their students. As a result, concerns over racial equality and equity within schools emerged. Subsequently, many White and Black parents and students have elected to exit their traditional public schools for a different educational experience and have flooded charter schools in which students look more similar to each other than in the integrated schools fought for in the 1950s.

The conceptual framework represented by Figure 1 was introduced in Chapter II. The conceptual framework undergirded every aspect of the research study and consisted of the instructional, organizational, social, and cultural aspects of schools and how these

aspects serve to anchor the work of schools in meeting the needs of students.

Additionally, critical race theory (CRT) was an ever-present consideration as one of the fundamental lenses through which to view the research data.

The methodology for this research study was outlined in Chapter III (see Figure 3). The methods for data collection and analysis were articulated. Through a fairly extensive process, the research data from the six data sets—individual student interview transcripts, parent phone interview transcripts, teacher Google form questionnaires, focus group transcripts, observations field notes, and records review documents—were coded into eleven categories (see Figure 4). Those eleven categories were then merged into four themes for interpretation (see Figure 5).

The description of the research study participants was provided in Chapter IV. Gaining insight into the student participants, their backgrounds, grades, and family experiences was a valuable component of the research. Moreover, learning more about their parents and teachers also added an additional dimension that helped bring the research participants' personalities and dispositions to the surface of the research study.

Chapter V revealed the data analysis of the categories of focus pertaining to the first two themes—purpose of schools and the understood value of education (see Figure 6). Students' stories and those of their parents and teachers were illuminated to provide insight into the decision to attend Success Academy and how that choice has impacted the student participants' educational experiences thus far. The narratives added a richness that only the voices of the case study participants could provide when analyzing schooling, learning, and their importance to students.

The remaining categories of focus relating to the last two themes—needs of students in schools and the absence of race were presented in Chapter VI (see Figure 7). Furthermore, to address the research questions, an analysis of the factors that positively or negatively influenced the educational experiences of the student participants in this case study was discussed as well as the factors that motivate the student participants to be invested in their academic future.

Chapter VII provided the research findings including the first three themes identified. Implications for researchers and policymakers were explored based upon the co-construction of knowledge as a result of the lived experiences of the study participants and their perceptions. The purpose of Chapter VIII is to discuss the final theme of this case study—the absence of race, which is replete with the researcher’s perspectives on the student participants’ educational experiences and final conclusions.

The Absence of Race

Chapter VII provided a detailed account of the research findings of the first three themes—purpose of schools, understood value of education, and needs of students in schools. Based on the perceptions of the student, parent, and teacher participants, Chapter VII acknowledged the rich narratives of the participants with their stories to add depth to the research study. Race was one of the eleven categories that emerged from the data as the result of the teacher participants. Neither the student nor parent participants acknowledged the role of race or its impact on the students’ educational experiences. This profoundly struck me as I thought that race would’ve been a major part of the

dialogue about the educational experiences of the disadvantaged Black middle school student participants attending a predominantly Black urban charter school.

The absence of race in the student and parent conversations is a silence that I cannot ignore. Throughout Chapter V and VI the researcher analyzed all of the categories that emerged into themes for examination. While tackling each of these categories and themes, race was a constant element that impacted the educational landscape of the students, yet neither the students nor their parents acknowledged it as such. Despite the silence or disbelief that race has been influential on the educational experiences of the student participants, I disagree. As the researcher I set out to co-construct meaning with the participants about their lived experiences throughout the research process. Therefore, I interject some of my beliefs about the student participants' lived experiences and the role that race has played in their educational experiences.

The teacher participants in this case study acknowledged their perceptions about race and its influence on the students' educational experiences. Moreover, I described the research setting that the student participants attend, a high poverty school that is predominantly Black with a predominantly Black staff. The setting itself has at its root the influence of race. Ullucci and Howard (2015) report that Black students are in large numbers attending schools with double segregation based on race and poverty. They go on to add, "Students of color in poverty are becoming increasingly isolated" (p. 171).

The Black student participants chose to attend Success Academy largely out of their impressions about the quality of the school choice options available to them. I have established that these are very limited due to the communities in which they live.

Moreover, the parents recalled memories of some very negative experiences in the traditional public schools their children left because of what I perceive to be racially motivated actions on the part of their teachers.

The teacher participants for this case study were non-Black, yet the staff is majority Black. The deficit perceptions about the students, their academic preparedness and the support of the parents, as shared by the teachers, had the undertones and influence of race. Garcia and Guerra (2004) acknowledge that deficit thinking that places the blame of student academic struggles on their lack of preparedness or lack of parent support undermines student achievement because educators do not assume their role as part of the problem.

In Garcia and Guerra's (2004) research they reinforce that "the majority of teachers are well-intentioned, caring individuals but are unaware of the deeper, hidden, or invisible dimensions of culture which have a significant influence on their own identity, educators' role definitions, and instructional practices" (p. 154). To add further credence to this notion, I note that Success Academy teachers stated that they support their students by being culturally minded. Paul expressed that he tries to "maintain a diverse perspective and allow students' voices to be heard." Additionally, Ramona says that she believes she relates well with her students. Furthermore, the students and parents are complimentary of the teachers and their interactions with students. At no time did I observe any interaction that suggests otherwise. I am struck however by Rebecca's comment, "Because most of the students are of one race, I don't think their race has influenced their experiences too much." The fact that students are of one race has

definitely influenced their experiences. Building awareness through professional development that “identifies elements of the school culture and the school climate that lead to institutional practices that systematically marginalize or pathologize difference” (Garcia & Guerra, 2004, p. 154) would be beneficial.

Professional development to identify these elements within the school is needed to truly be culturally responsive and to get to the root of adequate academic gains as measured by EOGs. Moreover, Ullucci and Howard (2015) share the need for educators to be race-conscious. Race conscious teachers have an “awareness of race, of the possibility of their own racism and the racism of others, and the significance of these perceptions in the teaching and learning process” (p. 174). Awareness is the key to overcoming deficit thinking. The staff at Success Academy has a golden opportunity to make a difference because the student participants they serve are already engaged and invested in school and their parents are supportive and want to be involved in their children’s education. Building awareness will not eliminate the issues that race brings to the table but it could provide greater opportunities to ensure the student participants are on a solid academic foundation to pursue high school and beyond.

The absence of race also brings to the forefront the issue of colorblindness. CRT scholars and researchers address the notion that as a society we have a tendency to avoid issues of race. This avoidance has been recognized and Warren (2014) notes that the U.S. attorney general, Eric Holder, called the United States “a nation of cowards” (p. 109) because we do not seek to shed light on the issues involving race in our country. In Chapter VI, I noted that it is doubtful students are having conversations about race due to

their parents denying any impact of race on their students' educational experiences and the students themselves not acknowledging any influence. Additionally, it is equally doubtful that students are having these conversations in the classrooms of their non-Black teachers due to the discomfort many educators experience surrounding issues of race. Furthermore, it is doubtful that students have these conversations in their Black teachers' classrooms because the Black teachers probably think they don't need to have the conversations since they are of the same race. All of this avoidance or indifference results in the lack of recognition of race and its place in our society, our communities, and our schools.

In Chapter V, I addressed the purpose of schools is to educate students and to prepare them for college, careers, and for life. It is also a purpose of schools to equip students to be prepared to be citizens in society. Race is an essential social issue that students will be faced with at every level in their future. Therefore, it must be taught in order to ensure students are gaining an understanding about race and its influence on education and the social, political, moral, and economic issues of our time. Warren (2014) provides strategies for teaching antiracism to build racial consciousness and to build racial competency. This is a viable exploration as a professional development goal for Success Academy and for all schools.

This section has explored the absence of race from the stories of the student and parent participants. It has addressed the presence of race in the stories of the teacher participants and the need for more cultural awareness to build competence in teaching and learning based on acknowledgement of deficit thinking and ways to counteract that

mindset. Chapter VIII provides implications for researchers and policymakers as well as final conclusions.

Implications and Recommendations

The research on disadvantaged Black middle school students and their educational experiences is limited. The opportunity to learn from their lived experiences has been a humbling and gratifying opportunity. Subsequently, more of the stories need to be told and heard in order to shed some light on the experiences Black middle school students have in school. The next subsections will outline implications for further research.

Students like the student participants in this case study are motivated to learn and have good intentions for their futures. As educators and researchers, we must ensure that these students are not the exception to the rule. Deborah Meier (1995) writes, “The question is not, Is it possible to educate all children well? But rather, Do we want to do it badly enough?” (p. 4). Teachers who teach our most challenging students, students that are low performing or have behavioral issues must have better preparedness for how to best meet the needs of all students, those who are easy to teach and those who are not. General teacher preparation programs are not equipping teachers to help Disadvantaged minority students overcome their skill deficits. Yet, economists Kain and Hanushek (2002) state, “Having an above average teacher for five years running can completely close the average gap between low-income students and others” (as cited in Schmoker, 2006, p. 1).

For many schools, homogeneous groupings of students of poverty or of similar academic or behavior difficulties coupled with teachers who aren’t prepared to teach

them effectively is a recipe for failure. Far too often students experience this or have a revolving door of teachers who leave because they are ill equipped to handle the dynamics of challenging students, as was mentioned by student participants.

Furthermore, teacher turnover is also a problem in many schools. In Chapter V, several students noted experiences in which they had numerous teachers in one year in the traditional public schools. Moreover, the teacher participants acknowledge teacher turnover is an issue at Success Academy as well. While most educators agree this is not an ideal situation for students, few options exist for meeting the distinct needs of students or providing adequate training opportunities for teachers to ensure their success as well as the success of their students. Additional research needs to be done to investigate ways in which successful middle school teachers of all races are making impact with disadvantaged Black students in high poverty schools.

I noted that Success Academy's academic decline began with the implementation of the Common Core curriculum. Common Core has posed challenges for all schools as teachers and teacher education programs play catch up to revise instructional strategies to match a more rigorous and relevant curriculum. Research on effective instructional strategies aimed at helping teachers provide the skills needed to be independent and critical thinkers, able to solve complex problems, and perform on high stakes tests like EOG with increased standards of accountability is needed.

Bell's (1980) Interest-Conversion Construct

When considering the new NC READY Accountability Model and its impact on NC schools, I considered Derrick Bell's (1980) interest-convergence construct. This

CRT construct suggests that legal decisions and social policies are created to perpetuate the interests of upper class Whites (Bell, 1980; Donnor, 2005; Milner, 2008). The new NC accountability model assigns a letter grade to schools based on EOG test performance and schools with higher poverty ratings are more likely to have lower letter grades. L. Wagner (2015b) states,

Of the nearly 30 percent of North Carolina's schools receiving letter grades of D or F from the state, almost all of them are designated as high poverty schools with at least 50 percent of their students receiving free or reduced lunch. (para. 1)

Additionally, these high poverty schools are likely to be majority Black and Hispanic. Thus, an educational policy that is supposed to ensure all students have equal access to quality education in essence reveals the disparities between schools and may influence parents to seek schools where the letter grades are better, thereby perpetuating existing concerns about segregation of schools. Moreover, I question what is being done to assist schools with low letter grades? If no planning has been enacted to assist and support schools with improving their letter grades, I reflect on how this new accountability model is benefitting the students it was designed to protect and how it will help close the achievement gap that remains and is now further illuminated.

An interest-convergence analysis might reveal that the focus on letter grades of high-poverty schools may inadvertently result in increased support for charter schools due to additional reinforcement of NC schools failing to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged students in the state. Likewise, additional support for increased funding and expansion of charter schools is a current budget issue being debated in the NC

General Assembly (Campbell, 2015; Leslie, 2015; Public Schools of North Carolina, State Board of Education, & Department of Public Instruction, 2015b). However, as discussed in Chapter I, research that provides evidence of effective instructional strategies with disadvantaged Black students is elusive. Furthermore, research that examines the inequities of disadvantaged students attending high poverty schools with low letter grades compared with the funding stream would be beneficial to illuminate why our legislature wants to increase funding for charter schools that are not making the cut why.

Charter schools do not have the same requirements with regards to teachers being highly qualified. Charter schoolteachers are not considered state employees because they are contracted with the charter school's board of directors. Therefore, only 50% of charter schoolteachers have to be highly qualified unless they teach a core academic content area like reading or math. Core content teachers must meet the federal requirements to be highly qualified.

Moe and Chubb (2009) state, "The effectiveness of the teacher is the number one influence on achievement" (p. 95). If having an above average teacher is a key to improving the educational experiences of disadvantaged Black students and those of other poor minorities, a socially just educational system would make it a priority to ensure all teachers are above average. Above average teachers in every classroom in America seems like a far-reaching fantasy but is not impossible.

To ensure above average teachers are in every classroom in North Carolina and America would require researchers and policymakers at every level to review current

teacher education programs, practices, and curricula. The cost to conduct such a comprehensive review and to revise current practices to equip teachers with best practices for instruction would be minimal with comparison to the cost of continuing to run ineffective schools, to recruit and retain teachers who may or may not be effective, to continuously remediate students who are behind, and to cover social programs and jails for dropouts who put a financial strain on the economy and turn to a life of crime.

Teachers who are already in the classroom need opportunities for professional development to ensure they too have the necessary skills for success. Moe and Chubb (2009) suggest, “Great schools are those in which teachers receive intensive, ongoing professional development, are rigorously evaluated, and are retained or counseled out only after demonstrating the clear ability to help students learn” (p. 95). This type of focus on quality teaching and learning would require funding for all teachers to be trained in research based instructional strategies that are engaging, authentic, rigorous, and purposeful. An additional strategy to ensure teachers follow through on these instructional strategies would be to provide funding to school districts for instructional coaches.

Instructional coaches, proven to be teaching experts would observe teachers and provide feedback about how they are implementing sound teaching strategies and how these practices are influencing student achievement. Carter and Welner (2013) acknowledge that funding additional support for new teachers would cost money but would inevitably save money over time by focusing on high student and teacher

accountability. Moreover, all of the focus on teaching and learning will be limited if teachers do not know and understand their students.

Teachers knowing and understanding their students would create a need for more research on racism and the notion of colorblindness. Professional development designed to equip current teachers with tools to better understand themselves and those they teach would be beneficial. Moreover, more should be done with cultural sensitivity that would be beneficial for schools and teachers. The next section addresses the cultural implications of a focus on cultural sensitivity and the importance of successful transitioning for new or transfer students. How these cultural attributes frame future research or possibilities for policymakers invested in the success of disadvantaged Black middle school students' educational experiences is also discussed.

Cultural Sensitivity

The following statistic reveals a glimpse of the cultural needs impacting schools across the U.S. Maxwell (2014) notes,

In the 2011–12 school year, 82 percent of 3.4 million public school teachers were non-Hispanic White, while 7 percent were non-Hispanic Black and 8 percent were Hispanic, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics. That distribution has budged little in the last decade. In 2003–04, 83 percent of all public school teachers were non-Hispanic White. (p. 23)

With current projections of 50.3% of students in school today being non-White, educators and policymakers must face the stark reality that the demographics of education are changing and so must the way we approach teaching and learning (Maxwell, 2014).

Cultural sensitivity training and ways to build family and community buy-in are key components to building partnerships for sustaining student success. Given the knowledge that for the first time in American history, White students are now the minority in American schools, it is imperative that we seek educational reform to ensure students are afforded an education that not only preserves their cultural heritage but also helps students bridge the divide between student achievement of White and non-White students (Maxwell, 2014). Maxwell goes on to say that the cultural divide that exists between White teachers and their non-White students must be a consideration for educational reform to ensure teachers are able to relate to their students and understand the best instructional practices to reach them and challenge them to be successful.

Cultural sensitivity could help bolster parental support and investment in school. Parents who feel welcome and that their input and influence matter are more likely to be engaged and involved in their child's education, thereby increasing their child's likelihood for success. Administrators and teachers need resources on how to bridge cultural gaps in order to build family and community partnerships. Equalizing access to cultural knowledge helps build capacity for all students to be successful in and out of school. A research focus on cultural sensitivity when transitioning students is also an important research topic.

The transition from middle school to high school has been researched with regards to student, parent and teacher thoughts about transitions to middle and high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004) and the research indicates that students typically struggle with the transition to high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000).

The student participants in this study were very focused and knowledgeable about the transition to high school. A longitudinal case study designed to follow the student participants into their high school years would be beneficial to gain an understanding of how they exercised their choice on what high school setting to attend and if they were selected to attend the school of their choice.

It would also be interesting to gain more insight into whether the student participants' educational experiences at Success Academy prepared them for high school and later, college and careers. The students have such high aspirations for their future, their strong motivation to learn and their resilience would be excellent areas for future research. More research about disadvantaged Black student motivation and resilience is needed. This section included implications for research on disadvantaged Black student motivation to learn and resilience. Figure 9 lists research implications for policymakers and researchers. The next section discloses final insights and conclusions.

Conclusions

As a middle school principal I thought I knew a lot about middle school students. However, my reality in working with my students is so vastly different from the reality of the students at Success Academy. I learned so much from the case study participants about the power of resilience, high expectations, perseverance, and motivation to learn. I have never met such motivated young people at their ages. To say they seem wise beyond their years is an understatement. This research study opened my eyes to the power of fortitude and the will to achieve.

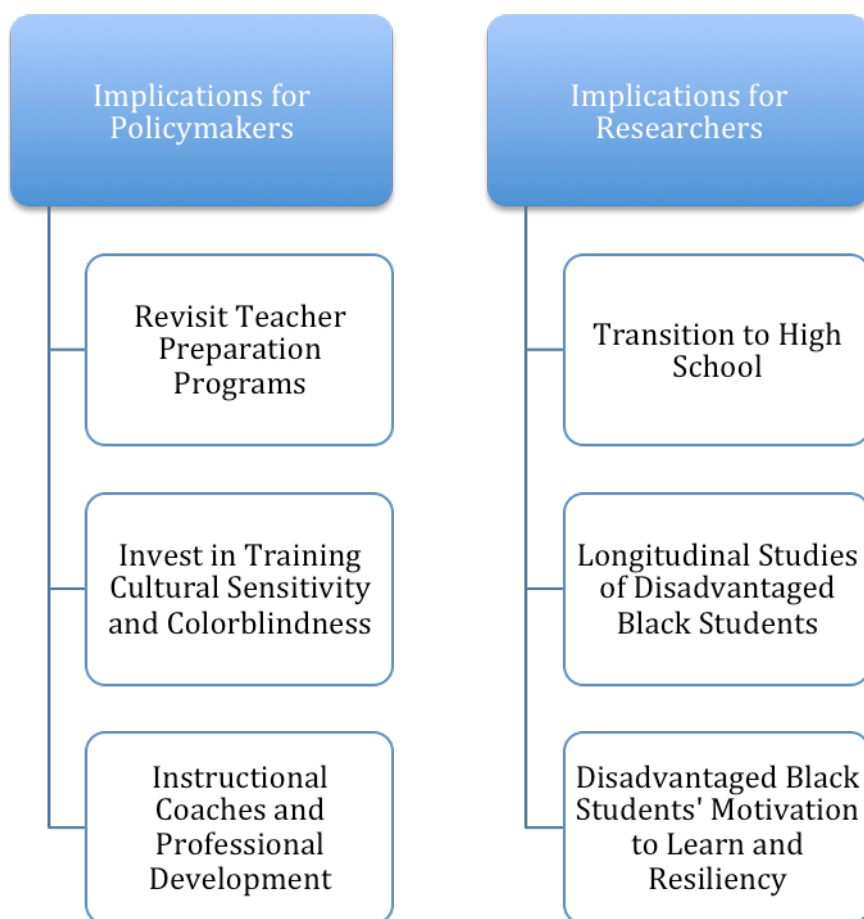


Figure 9. Research Implications.

It was my distinct pleasure to have been welcomed into Success Academy and to have had the opportunity to meet the students, their parents, the staff, and teachers. Because of my background as an educator, I can't help but be concerned about the overall lack of academic progress as measured by the end of grade tests. However, this school is doing more than focusing on test scores. They are helping young people to develop self worth, self-confidence, and a will to learn. Motivating students to learn is nearly impossible if they do not have an innate desire. Not only do these students have the desire, they can articulate it along with plans for their futures.

Despite the odds stacked against them of living in a poor, urban community with little access to the best schools or economic advantages, these students are not down and they certainly aren't out. Success Academy is a beacon of hope that a school can make a difference when students and their families are embraced, when a culture of high expectations and self-discipline prevails coupled with a kind, caring, and nurturing staff. I have been renewed as an educator with an increased passion for students who need an extra bit of encouragement. Moreover, I am also driven by the pursuit of teaching excellence.

To know and understand that the number one influence on student achievement is the teacher should create a sense of urgency to ensure that all students have the best possible chance to be successful. This means being more vigilant in observing and evaluating teachers to provide descriptive feedback for improvement. It also encourages a need for more focus on how to build cultural sensitivity in schools to help all students have a learning environment in which they can be successful. Finally, schools must equip students to be respectful of themselves and others to prevent bullying. The pain that bullying caused the student participants in their own words was chilling.

This research study, like most, came with some surprises. One surprise was the lack of funding that charter schools get. I was under the assumption that charter schools are funded the same as traditional public schools but was rudely awakened by the distinct reality that they are not. When we consider funding to be a key factor to overall school success and from a social justice standpoint, we focus on equitable funding, this is an issue that needs to be examined. The lack of materials and resources at Success

Academy was unimaginable. Whether opposed to charter schools or a proponent, students are the ones who suffer with inequitable funding and inadequate resources. It is shameful that in the wealthiest country in the world we would have schools without adequate materials, supplies, and resources to educate its most needy students.

Education affords disadvantaged and at-risk students freedom and levels the playing field for all when the school is structured for success. Children are the future of our country. Equipping students with the skills to be responsible and productive citizens in a diverse culture is essential and should be a human right of all.

A focus on the lived experiences of the student participants, their parents, and teachers has been a refreshing and worthwhile endeavor. A strong focus on students, a safe and orderly school environment where mutual trust and respect abounds, combined with passionate teachers who care about their students and families create a recipe for student motivation to achieve. While this research study provides no conclusive evidence or generalizations that charter schools are making a difference for disadvantaged Black students, Success Academy is making a difference for the student participants in this research study by helping students to build their self-esteem and to be mindful of their future opportunities as they prepare for high school.

A second surprise was the absence of race by the research study participants. I perceived the entire study to be about race and that it would influence every aspect of the study. The research participants did not agree. Their silence on race caught me off guard but made a positive impact that the student participants are living their lives and are not clouded by overarching element of race. This is encouraging but at the same time

worrisome because race is a part of everyday life and the student participants need to be prepared for the world they will enter, a world that will see race.

The final surprise was my perception about charter schools changed over the course of the research study. Originally I was convinced Success Academy was the best school for the student participants in this study. Given the lack of progress on their EOGs, I am now reluctant to make that claim. I contend that schools are about more than producing test takers, yet academic achievement is the key for students to access their future goals and aspirations. For these reasons, I am unclear about my own perceptions concerning the educational delivery service option the student participants and their parents chose.

I no longer think charter schools are a necessity for disadvantaged Black students. I think they are a choice that every student and their parent should weigh prior to making that choice. All of the instructional, organizational, social, and cultural strategies that Success Academy employs can be employed in traditional public schools. Moreover, traditional public schools likely have more resources due to higher funding allocations. Therefore, as with any important life decision, the costs and the benefits must be weighed. In conclusion, a responsive school for all students is what is needed most. A responsive school that seeks to invest in its students through the integration of strong instructional, organizational, social, and cultural attributes built upon caring and nurturing relationships, a social justice stance, and opportunities for students to be challenged while supported in preparation for college and careers is the best choice we can provide for any child.

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APPENDIX A**UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO
CONSENT FOR A MINOR TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG
FORM**

Project Title: Charter Schools, a Choice or Necessity for Disadvantaged Black Students:
Examining Perceptions of Middle School Students' Educational Experiences

Project Director: Tracey H. Lewis, Ed.S.

Participant's Name: _____

What is the study about?

This study will examine the impact of charter schools on Black student achievement from middle school students' perceptions. The information gained will be used as a part of the requirements for a dissertation, presentation at conferences, and submission to academic journals.

Why are you asking my child?

I am asking for your child's participation in this study because he or she previously attended a traditional public school but made the decision to transfer to a charter school. I am interested in learning more about your child's thoughts about the differences between the two school settings. I am also interested in learning about how your child thinks the decision to transfer to the charter school has impacted his or her life in terms of personal life satisfaction, academic success, and preparation for life after high school.

What will you ask my child to do if I agree to let him or her be in the study?

I would like to observe and interview your child as well as other students with similar backgrounds. I also hope to conduct focus study group sessions with your child and a few other students in which the students will be able to talk candidly about their common experiences in a group setting. As part of your child's participation in this study, I will spend time with him or her and observe them in the school setting. I expect this to take one class period and one lunch period. I will interview your child by himself or herself and ask them questions about their background, life experiences, and school experiences that should take about an hour. I will also talk with your child and other students like them who agree to participate in the focus study group about their experiences at the charter school and their experiences when they were in traditional public schools. I anticipate this to take one to one and one-half hours depending on their sharing and that of the other participants.

Is there any audio/video recording of my child?

I would like your permission to view your child's cumulative record or documents about his or her school history to learn more about his or her time spent in traditional public school and time spent at the charter school. When I interview your child I would like permission to tape-record the interviews and to take notes to remind me of what we talked about. Because your child's voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, confidentiality for things said on the tape cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below. I will be the only person who gets to hear or see these tapes and notes and when I am not using them they will be kept in a locked cabinet that only I have the key to. When this study is completed, all of the tapes will be destroyed.

What are the dangers to my child?

There is a possibility that participation in a focus study group may be uncomfortable for your child as different issues are discussed.

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses no risk to participants. If you have any concerns about your child's rights, how they are being treated or if you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact my professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Dr. Carl Lashley at c_lashle@uncg.edu or 336-334-3745.

Questions about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study can be answered by Tracey Lewis who may be contacted at (336) 983-8612 or you may email me at tllewis2@uncg.edu.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of my child taking part in this research?

Your child's participation may help educators learn more about the educational experiences of Black students.

Are there any benefits to *my child* as a result of participation in this research study?

The benefits to your child of doing this study are that he or she may learn new things about themselves, their future goals, and might enjoy sharing their ideas with other students who have experienced success because of the transfer to the charter school.

Will my child get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything for my kid to be in this study?

There are no costs to you or payments to you or your child as a result of participation in this study.

How will my child's information be kept confidential?

Your child's information will be kept confidential by not identifying participants by name when data are compiled and disseminated. Anytime I use the information your child gives me, I will always identify him or her with a fake name and they may decide what name I use for them if he or she desires. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure are required by law as in cases of abuse or when a student is a danger to themselves or others. Please note that school administrators may know about your child's participation due to school requirements/policies for visitors. A master list linking the participants' names to their pseudonym will be maintained in a separate file from the data. The master list will be kept in a locking file cabinet at the researcher's home office and kept separate from the data.

What if my child wants to leave the study or I want him/her to leave the study?

You have the right to refuse to allow your child to participate or to withdraw him or her at any time, without penalty. If your child does withdraw, it will not affect you or your child in any way. If you or your child chooses to withdraw, you may request that any data that has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state.

What about new information/changes in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to allow your child to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By signing this consent form, you are agreeing that you have read it or it has been read to you, you fully understand the contents of this document and consent to your child taking part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are the legal parent or guardian of the child who wishes to participate in this study described to you by Tracey H. Lewis, Ed.S.

Participant's Parent/Legal Guardian's Signature

Date: _____

Participant's Parent/Legal Guardian's Signature

Date: _____

APPENDIX B**UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO
CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT**

Project Title: Charter Schools, a Choice or Necessity for Disadvantaged Black Students:
Examining Perceptions of Middle School Students' Educational Experiences

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor (if applicable): Tracey H. Lewis, Principal Investigator and Dr. Carl Lashley, Faculty Advisor

Participant's Name: _____

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

What is the study about?

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. This study examines the history of school choice in the U.S., as well as the impact and influence the government has on school choice options for parents in North Carolina. The impact of charter schools on low-income, Black student achievement will be investigated from the students' perceptions as well as the mitigating instructional, organizational, social, and cultural attributes of charter schools.

Why are you asking me?

I am asking for your participation in the study to gain information about the students' academic achievement in your school.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?

I am asking you to participate in an interview that should take one, but no more than two hours to discuss the student participants and your perceptions of why they are successful in your school but were not in their traditional public schools. Should follow up be necessary, I may ask you for an additional interview or request a phone conversation regarding follow-up for clarification.

Is there any audio/video recording?

I plan to audio record the interview. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, your confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed. Your interviews will be audio recorded and I will take anecdotal notes of each interview. Each interview will then be transcribed and you will be assigned a pseudonym to protect your identity.

What are the risks to me?

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. You may choose not to respond to any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or you may leave the study entirely at any point.

Should you have questions, concerns or suggestions about your participation, please contact Tracey Lewis at tllewis2@uncg.edu or 336-608-7534. You may also call my faculty advisor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Dr. Carl Lashley at c_lashle@uncg.edu or 336-334-3745.

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?

We may learn something that will help other children learn better in the future.

Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information confidential?

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Your information will be kept confidential by not identifying you by name when data is compiled and disseminated.

The audio recordings and transcripts will be kept in a secure locked location with which only the researcher will have the key and all recordings will be destroyed at the

conclusion of the research study. Transcriptions will be kept on a password-protected computer off the UNCG campus in the primary researcher's residence. A master list linking the participants' names to their pseudonym will be maintained in a separate file from the data. The master list will be kept in a locking file cabinet at the researcher's home office and kept separate from the data.

What if I want to leave the study?

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data, which has been collected, be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

What about new information/changes in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Tracey Lewis.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C

STUDENT ACADEMIC RECORDS REVIEW

Pseudonym	Net Change in ELA Final Grades Over ^{*4} Years	Net Change in Math Final Grades Over ^{*4} Years	Net Change in Reading EOG ~Levels Over All Prior Years	Net Change in Math EOG ~Levels Over All Prior Years	Proficient on 2013-2015 NC End of Grade Test of Reading?	Proficient on 2013-2015 NC End of Grade Test of Math?
Mo	No Change	No Change	^	^	^	^
RJ	No Change	No Change	^	^	^	^
Sarah	Declined 1 Letter Grade	Declined 1 Letter Grade	¹ Declined 1 Level	² Declined 1 Level	No	No
Jaylen	Improved 1 Letter grade	Improved 2 Letter Grades	No Change	Improved 1 Level	No	No
Carmen	Improved 1 Letter grade	Improved 1 Letter grade	³ No Change	⁴ Declined 1 Level	No	No
Heaven	No Change	Improved 1 Letter grade	⁵ Cannot Assess	⁶ Cannot Assess	^	^
Bianca	No Change	No Change	⁷ Cannot Assess	⁸ Cannot Assess	Yes	No
Darkwing	No Change	No Change	⁹ Cannot Assess	¹⁰ Cannot Assess	Yes	No

(Cont.)

Pseudonym	Net Change in ELA Final Grades Over [*] 4 Years	Net Change in Math Final Grades Over [*] 4 Years	Net Change in Reading EOG ~Levels Over All Prior Years	Net Change in Math EOG ~Levels Over All Prior Years	Proficient on 2013-2015 NC End of Grade Test of Reading?	Proficient on 2013-2015 NC End of Grade Test of Math?
Joshua	Improved 1 Letter grade	No Change	Declined 1 Level	Declined 2 Levels	No	No
Henry						

Notes. Denotes student participant changes in grades and past EOG performance over time.

^{*} Prior 4 school years.

[^] No information available.

[~] Prior to the 2013–2014 school year, NC EOG levels were 1, 2, 3, 4. With the 2013–2014 school year, NC EOG levels are now 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.

¹ Sarah was previously a level 3 (proficient) in reading every year except the 2013-2014 year.

² Sarah was previously a level 3 (proficient) in math every year except the 2013-2014 year.

³ Carmen had no middle school Reading EOG data available. Data represented is only for elementary school years.

⁴ Carmen had no middle school Math EOG data available. Data represented is only for elementary school years.

⁵ Heaven had VA Standards of Learning ELA scores. Data represented does not include NC EOG scores.

⁶ Heaven had VA Standards of Learning Math scores. Data represented does not include NC EOG scores.

⁷ Bianca had only 2013–2014 Reading EOG data available.

⁸ Bianca had only 2013–2014 Math EOG data available.

⁹ Darkwing had only 2013–2014 Reading EOG data available.

¹⁰ Darkwing had only 2013–2014 Math EOG data available.

APPENDIX D

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Student Name (Pseudonym) _____ **Date** _____

1. Please tell me about yourself and your family.
- 1a. If the response to question 1 includes a mother in the family, please share how much schooling your mother received.
- 1b. If the response to question 1 includes a father in the family, please share how much schooling your father received.
- 1c. If the response to question 1 includes siblings, please share how many siblings you have, their ages, grades in school, and type of school they attend (traditional public school or charter school).

I am very interested in learning about your experience(s) at your previous traditional public school.

2. What traditional public school did you attend before and for what grades?
3. Please share what you think was positive about your experience(s) at your previous school(s)?
- 3a. What made the experience(s) positive?
4. Please share what you think was negative about your experience(s) at your previous school(s)?
- 4a. What made the experience(s) negative?
5. What would you say is the most important thing you remember about your experience(s) at your previous school?
- 5a. Why is that memory most important to you?
6. Please share how you performed academically at your previous school or what your grades were like?
- 6a. If response to question 6 is below average to poor, why do you think your grades were poor at your previous school?
- 6b. If response to question 6 is average to above average, why do you think your grades were good at your previous school?

I am very interested in understanding your thoughts and experiences at the charter school.

7. Please share what led you to transfer to the charter school?
8. How involved were your parents in the decision to transfer to the charter school?
- 8a. If the response to question 8 is not very involved, why do you think your parents weren't very involved in the decision to transfer?
- 8b. If the response to question 8 is very involved, why do you think your parents were so involved in the decision to transfer?
9. What would you say was the most important factor in your transfer?
10. Please share how long or what grades you have attended at the charter school.
11. Please share what you think is positive about your experience(s) at the charter school.
- 11a. What made the experience(s) positive?
12. Please share what you think is negative about your experience(s) at the charter school.
- 12a. What made the experience(s) negative?
13. What would you say is the most important thing you like about your experience(s) at the charter school?
14. Please share how you currently perform academically or what your grades are like?
- 14a. If response to question 14 is below average to poor, why do you think your grades are poor?
- 14b. If response to question 14 is average to above average, why do you think your grades are good?
15. If there is anything you'd like to share with your principals or teachers at your previous school(s) about how they could make school better, what would you tell them?

I am interested in learning how your charter school compares and contrasts to your previous traditional public school.

16. How are the schools alike?
17. How are they different?
18. What are your thoughts about the teaching style of teachers at your previous school(s) in comparison with the teaching style of teachers at the charter school?

19. What are your thoughts about the relationships you had with teachers at your previous school(s) in comparison with your relationships with teachers at the charter school?
20. What are your thoughts about the friendships you had with other students at your previous school(s) in comparison with your friendships at the charter school?
21. In what ways, if any has the charter school changed your life positively or negatively?
22. If there were anything you could change about your educational experiences what would it be and why?
23. If there is anything you'd like to share with your principals or teachers at the charter school about how they could make school better, what would you tell them?
24. Is there anything else you'd like me to know about your school experiences?
25. What are your future plans or goals?
26. What do you think most influenced these future plans?

APPENDIX E
PARENT TELEPHONE INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Parent Name (Pseudonym) _____ **Date** _____

Student Name (Pseudonym) _____

Thank you for allowing your child to participate in this study.

1. Please tell me about yourself and your family.
- 1a. How much schooling did you complete?
- 1b. If the response to question 1 includes other children, please share how many children you have, their ages, grades in school, and type of school they attend (traditional public school or charter school).

I am very interested in learning about your child's experience(s) at the traditional public school.

2. Please share what you think was positive about your child's experience(s) at their previous school(s)?
- 2a. What made the experience(s) positive?
3. Please share what you think was negative about your child's experience(s) at their previous school(s)?
- 3a. What made the experience(s) negative?
4. What would you say is the most important thing, if any, you like about your child's experience(s) at the charter school?
5. What would you say is the most important thing, if any, you dislike about your child's experience(s) at the charter school?
6. What would you say is the most important thing you remember about your child's experience(s) at their previous school(s)?
- 6a. Why is that memory most important to you?
7. Please share what your child's academic performance and grades were like at their previous school(s)?
- 7a. Why do you think their grades or performance were that way at their previous school?

8. If there is anything you'd like to share with your child's principals or teachers at their previous school(s) about how they could make school better, what would you tell them?

I am very interested in understanding your thoughts and experiences at the charter school.

9. Please share what led you to transfer your child to the charter school?
10. What would you say was the most important factor in your decision to transfer?
11. Please share what your child's academic performance and grades are like at the charter school.
12. Why do you think their grades or performance is this way at the charter school?
13. Please share what you think is positive about your child's experience(s) at the charter school.
- 13a. What made the experience(s) positive?
14. Please share what you think is negative about your child's experience(s) at the charter school.
- 14a. What made the experience(s) negative?
15. What would you say is the most important thing, if any, you like about your child's experience(s) at the charter school?
16. What would you say is the most important thing, if any, you dislike about your child's experience(s) at the charter school?
17. If there is anything you'd like to share with your child's principals or teachers at the charter school about how they could make school better, what would you tell them?

I am interested in learning how your charter school compares and contrasts to your previous traditional public school.

18. How are the schools alike?
19. How are they different?
20. In what ways, if any has the charter school changed your child's life positively or negatively?
21. Is there anything else you'd like me to know about your child's school experiences?

APPENDIX F

TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Teacher Name (Pseudonym) _____ **Date** _____

1. Please tell me about yourself and why you became a teacher.
2. Please share anything you'd like to share about your experiences as a student in school.
3. Please talk to me about your teaching experience and include how many years you've taught in traditional public schools and here at the charter school.
4. Please share why you decided to pursue a job at a charter school and how it has impacted your career.
5. How do you think these experiences impact your teaching?

I am very interested in understanding your thoughts about your students' experience(s) in school.

6. Why do you think your low-income, minority students are successful in your classes?
7. Why do you think your low-income, minority students are successful in your school?
8. What social, cultural, and organizational factors here help your students be successful?
9. What is the biggest challenge you face in educating low-income, minority students in your classes and in your school?
10. Why do you think parents chose to move their children from traditional public schools here to the charter school?
11. How has race influenced your students' experiences in school?
12. How has race influenced your experiences as a teacher?
13. Please share what, if anything you think is positive about your students' experience(s) at the charter school. What makes the experience(s) positive?
14. Please share what, if anything you think is negative about your students' experience(s) at the charter school. What makes the experience(s) negative?
15. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about your students' experiences in the charter school?

16. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about your experiences teaching in the charter school or traditional public schools?

APPENDIX G

TEACHER PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS

Pseudonym	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Teaching Experience in Traditional Public Schools	Teaching Experience in Charter Schools	Personal Experiences as a Student in School	Why I Became a Teacher
Ramona	European American/ White	Female	11 years	3 years	I liked going to school and did well in school. I went to a small Catholic school from kindergarten through 8th grade, then to a public high school. I cheered, played basketball and softball. I was in the honor society and the yearbook.	I became a teacher because ever since I could remember that is what I wanted to do. I enjoy planning and I like children. I am patient and truly enjoy getting the best out of students.
Paul	European American/ White	Male	2 years	1 years	I was a fairly good student, though certainly not at the head of my class. In high school I took some AP classes, and always took honors.	I have always really enjoyed history, politics and current events. In high school I also became very interested in social justice. Since my mother and sister are teachers, going into teaching seemed like a way to combine these things.

(Cont.)

Pseudonym	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Teaching Experience in Traditional Public Schools	Teaching Experience in Charter Schools	Personal Experiences as a Student in School	Why I Became a Teacher
Rebecca	Asian American	Female	15 years	8 years	I loved going to school and enjoyed learning. My favorite subject as a student was Math. I had a great math teacher who made learning fun. Our school was located close to the beach so during PE class we would get swimming lessons.	My dad was an assistant principal and was my biggest inspiration. I guess I followed in his footsteps and don't regret it.

APPENDIX H**FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE**

Date _____

Question 1: I would like to begin by asking everyone to tell us a little about yourself and your family. Please include your grade and how many years you've attended this school.

Question 2: What led you to leave the public school you were attending to come here for school?

Question 3: Who or what do you think had the most influence on your decision to transfer?

Question 4: In general, how satisfied are you with the education you are receiving here and why?

Question 5: In general, how satisfied were you with the education you were receiving in the public school you left and why?

Question 6: What could've made your experience better in the public school?

Question 7: What could make your experience better in your current school?

Question 8: How satisfied are you with the teachers here? Do you feel comfortable asking for help and do you receive help when you do?

Question 9: Let's pretend you could change school to make it the best learning environment you could imagine. What characteristics would make that school the ideal school?

Follow up question: How similar is your current school to the ideal school you imagined?

Follow up question: How similar was your previous public school to the ideal school you imagined?

Question 10: Each of you has improved your grades since coming to this school. Why do you think that is?

Question 11: Do you think your education is equal to or the same as other students in this school and why do you feel that way?

Question 12: Do you think your education is equal to or the same as other students in your former public school and why do you feel that way?

Question 13: Do you have any other suggestions on how schools could be improved for students to learn and grow academically?

Focus Group Discussion Closure: Thank you for your active participation in the focus group. Does anyone have any last burning comments to share before we dismiss to go back to class? Again, please remember we all agreed to keep what we discussed confidential so you must not share who is in the group or what we discussed with others. Does everyone understand? Thank you again and if you have questions at any time, please feel free to contact me. My contact information is on the form I gave you a copy of about the research study.

Focus Group Members in Attendance (Pseudonyms):
